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TOWARD A CHRISTIAN THEOPOETIC

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The School of Theology at Claremont

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Religion

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by  
Michael Oden

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*This dissertation, written by*

**Michael Oden**

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*has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty  
of the School of Theology at Claremont in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of*

**DOCTOR OF MINISTRY**

*Faculty Committee*

*Patricia Martin Doyle*

*Ronald E. Osborn*

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*June 5, 1974.*

*Date*

*James C. Haughe, Jr.*

*Dean*

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a sense in which we live on stage. It is in the theatre of our experience that we make sense out of the drama of existence. Life is an art-form for we are all created beings. How we might catch a vision of the play is the aim of this dissertation. My purpose is to outline the need for blending the theologian's discipline with the poet's artistic grasp of human experience toward the goal of understanding how God and humanity have met in Jesus Christ and continue to interact. Such a blend is called a Christian Theopoetic.

The starting point shall be the present historical milieu in which we find ourselves, for theopoetic expression is a universal phenomenon, made ever more poignant in times of great social flux like our own. My methodology will be to examine what selected cultural observers have written regarding the nature of our present human experience. I begin with Amos Wilder, whose plea for theopoetic expression awakened my own awareness to the many dimensions inherent in such an approach to theology. The need defined and the plea expressed is the foundational aspect of chapter one. The suggested dimensions of all that is meant by a Christian theopoetic is covered in chapter two.

Chapter three is pivotal in that it attempts to discuss the universality of what I mean by theopoetic expression. Man is created in the image of God and has ever sought to return the compliment by reflecting out of his inner consciousness the various archetypal images that seem to emerge from his theological imagination. This chapter

lifts up the importance of modern psychological research, especially that of Carl Jung, in recognizing the significance of archetypal images and myths as they speak to the innate need of man to experience God.

The last two chapters are my attempt to suggest some concrete applications for theopoetic expression in the life and ministry of the Christian Church. In chapter four, I suggest as a theopoetic model for professional ministry, the ancient role of shaman. Following this, I discuss in some detail my suggestions for a new understanding of certain traditional disciplines of the church: prayer and healing, teaching and liturgy.

Finally, in chapter five, the discussion turns to how the Christian gospel is proclaimed in such a way that it reaches the heart of man in a life-changing encounter. Since I believe that Jesus and the early church changed people's lives and therefore the quality of life in general through theopoetic means, the final section will suggest means by which the modern church can so witness.

If my objectives are accomplished, I hope that the way will have been paved for a greater appreciation of not only God's life-giving Spirit but also the artistic quest of men and women to celebrate with zest the mystical encounter with the One they find at the heart of creative living. For only when we rejoice at the depths of our existence do we find that God is at the core of this experience and is ever calling us to a greater awareness of the goodness of life.

## Chapter 1

### A PLEA FOR THEOPOETIC EXPRESSION

Writing in *Christian Century* not long ago, Amos N. Wilder set forth a challenge which is the impetus to this paper. Recognizing that religious communication has long been "addicted to the discursive, the rationalistic, the dogmatic and prosaic," he continued:

My plea for theopoetic means doing more justice to the role of the symbolic and the prerational in the way we deal with experience. We should recognize that human nature and human societies are more deeply motivated by images and mythologies than by ideas. This is where power lies and where the future is shaped.<sup>1</sup>

It is Wilder's claim and mine that our present age has lost its imagination and ability to experience deeply—a claim that is verified in perusal of recent theological work. In our time poetic expression of man's intimate relation to his world and his God has been decreasing, not necessarily due to lack of artistic ingenuity, but because of a loss of the experience of intimacy with the world and with God. In his book, The Politics of Experience, R. D. Laing has observed:

There is no doubt, it seems to me, that there have been profound changes in the experience of man in the last thousand years. In some ways this is more evident than changes in the patterns of his behavior. There is everything to suggest that man experienced God. Faith was never a matter of believing he existed, but of trusting in the presence that was experienced and known to exist as a self-validating datum. It seems likely that people in our time experience neither the presence of God nor the presence of

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<sup>1</sup>Amos N. Wilder, "Theology and Theopoetic," Christian Century, XC: 21 (May 23, 1973), 593-596.

absence, but the absence of his presence.<sup>2</sup>

We are at a crucial stage in human development. The loss of transcendental experience within the common elements of life is part of this transition we are undergoing at the present time. To begin with, I will examine the emerging religious consciousness as it manifests itself in contemporary life. Then I shall look more closely at the breakdown in our process of symbolization and seek its implications. And finally, I shall look at theopoetic expression as a viable means of doing theology in this time of cultural transition.

#### THE EMERGING RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS

It is the nature of man to assume that the time in which he lives is one of the more crucial periods in all of history. A common error in perspective leads individuals to proclaim that theirs is the crisis of the centuries, that one culture is dying, and another is coming to life. Often this amounts to no more than observing the constant flux of historical events from the standpoint of one who is caught in the rapids with no sure footing. On the other hand, it may well be that historians, sociologists, and anthropologists are now equipped to distinguish the entrance of a new epoch from mere rapid social change.

In any event, something is in the air. The time seems out of joint. We are in the midst of a cultural upheaval that no simple

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<sup>2</sup>R. D. Laing, The Politics of Experience (New York: Ballantine, 1967), p. 143.

"future shock" theory can explain away. It calls for more precise analysis that will probe beyond the obvious assertion that tomorrow is too quickly becoming today.

In a recent essay for *Time* entitled "Some Second Thoughts About Man," a perceptive writer captured the present mood:

Some see it as a new Reformation, straining to meet its Luther at a yet undiscovered cathedral door. Some hail it as an evolutionary crisis, with the cells of the old humanity fairly bursting to reassemble into some more spiritual new being. To others it may be a more prosaic phenomenon, the inevitable swing of the pendulum, the return to some forgotten truths--or dangerous superstitions.<sup>3</sup>

A new Reformation? The return of the pendulum's swing? An evolutionary transformation? Or could it be the completion of an epochal cycle in a world where history seems to go around in circular rotation?

Whatever it is that we are experiencing, it is obvious to even the disinterested atheist that there is a spiritual depth to the contemporary social flux. To be sure, institutional religion is in deep trouble these days. But this may be due only to the fact that people are so deeply concerned about personal religious issues that they are tired of listening to packaged pronouncements from the churches. If the interest in spirituality was taking place within the institutional church, we could describe it as simply the result of more attention given to evangelism. But this does not seem to be the case.

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<sup>3</sup>"Second Thoughts About Man," *Time*, Vol. 101:78-80 (April 2, 1973)



So what is taking place today? An astute observer of the contemporary American scene, Theodore Roszak, renders the following explanation:

The religious renewal we see happening about us...seems to me neither trivial nor irresponsible, neither uncivil nor indecent. On the contrary, I accept it as a profoundly serious sign of the times, a necessary phase of our cultural evolution, and--potentially--a life-enhancing influence of incalculable value. I believe it means we have arrived, after long journeying, at an historical vantage point from which we can at last see where the wasteland ends and where a culture of human wholeness and fulfillment begins.<sup>4</sup>

Is Roszak correct in his assessment of our period of cultural transition? If he is, then our contemporary situation is not the result of another swing of the pendulum, or another turn of the cultural wheel as society recycles. We may well be in the midst of a significant new stage in man's religious evolvement that is effecting every facet of humanity's understanding of transcendent experience. A transformation of religious consciousness, if that is what is now taking place, will mean new forms of "God-expression" which I am referring to as "Theo-poetics."

Sociologist of religion, Robert N. Bellah, has rendered a careful analysis of the development of religion in human consciousness. Applying the evolutionary methodology to religious evidences, Bellah views the present stage of man's socio-religious structure as part of a long and continuing process. "Religion," he defines as "a set of symbolic forms and acts that relate man to the ultimate conditions of

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<sup>4</sup>Theodore Roszak, Where The Wasteland Ends (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. xxii.

his existence."<sup>5</sup> Thus, it is not God who is evolving, nor can we say that man as a religious being is any different today from any other time in history, but that religion as a symbol system evolves. It may be that our religious situation today is quite similar to that of primitive societies, but the means by which contemporary man expresses his religious experience has certainly changed.

According to Bellah, the ways in which man chooses to symbolize his sense of the sacred has evolved through the centuries, for "evolution" is

a process of increasing differentiation and complexity of organization that endows the organism, social system or whatever the unity in question with greater capacity to adapt to its environment, so that it is in some sense more autonomous relative to its environment than were its less complex ancestors.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout history, mankind has known both a physical and a non-physical world. This non-physical world, the transcendent realm, has so impressed his consciousness that he has been compelled to express it in images, symbols and myth. These various images, symbols and myths have been the cultural record of man's encounter with, and adaptation to, transcendent reality.

Proof that we stand on a continuum of religious evolution is based on three presuppositions of Bellah. The first is that "religious symbolization tends to change over time, at least in some

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<sup>5</sup>Robert Bellah, "Religious Evolution," in his Beyond Belief (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

instances, in the direction of more differentiated, comprehensive, and...more rationalized formulations."<sup>7</sup> Without tools, for instance, a cave-dweller would feel dependent upon the natural elements of rain and sun, growth and decay for his physical survival. For this cave-dweller, the "ultimate conditions of his existence"<sup>8</sup> are the rhythms of nature, and his symbols portray an intimacy to the earth and the elements. But with the invention of tools, man begins to separate himself from nature, to till the land and store the water, and so his symbols become more complex and rationalized. The sense of awe he once felt in the midst of a forest garden, are replicated in shrines and symbols. The man in the cave has come out into the open sunlight to bend nature to his will, and he can never go back into the dark naivete' of the cave again.

Bellah's next assumption is that:

Conceptions of religious action, of the nature of the religious actor, of religious organization, and of the place of religion in the society tend to change in ways systematically related to the changes in symbolization.<sup>9</sup>

What this implies is that culture is the carrier of meaning. Or to use Tillich's words:

The form of religion is culture...Religious language is ordinary language, changed under the power of what it expresses, the ultimate of being and meaning. The expression of it can be narrative (mythological, legendary, historical), or it can be prophetic, poetic, liturgical. It becomes holy for those to whom it expresses their ultimate concern from generation to generation.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 24

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 21

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 24

But there is no holy language in itself, as translations, retranslations, and revisions show.<sup>10</sup>

As culture changes in each succeeding generation, there are changes in the process of symbolization as well. The liturgy and liturgist, the priest and the priesthood are understood to have different meanings and functions depending upon the specific stages of cultural self-understanding.

The third presupposition Bellah suggests is that these "several changes in the sphere of religion (i.e. religious evolution) ...are related to a variety of other dimensions of change in other social spheres that define the general process of socio-cultural evolution."<sup>11</sup> Put quite simply, man's religious consciousness inevitably affects his political and social structures. An obvious example of this would be the philosophy surrounding the idea of the "divine right of Kings," and later, the doctrine known as the "Manifest Destiny."

With this said, let us look briefly at the five stages of religious consciousness described by Robert Bellah as "relatively stable crystallizations of roughly the same order of complexity along a number of different dimensions."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Paul Tillich, Theology of Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 48, 49.

<sup>11</sup>Bellah, p. 24

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

The five stages are:

- A. Primitive
- B. Archaic
- C. Historic
- D. Early Modern
- E. Modern

The questions we want to address each stage will include: How did man look at the world during each period of evolving religious consciousness? What were his religious symbol system, religious action and religious organization? And finally, what were the social implications of that level of religious awareness?

### Primitive Religion

According to Bellah<sup>13</sup>, the two interrelated features of man's primitive religious consciousness were the mythical and the actual world. Every component of man's environment--the trees, the rivers, the sky, are explained in terms of mythical beings. Actual existence and mythologies were related in the most intimate way, a state of mind referred to by many researchers as "the dreaming" or "a time out of time." This was a period when the first stirrings of religious symbolization appeared in the human psyche.

But because there was little or no separation of religion from

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<sup>13</sup>The following discussion is from the Bellah essay cited above, and for the sake of convenience, will only be footnoted when specific quotations are excerpted for emphasis.

life for primitive man, there was no ritual apart from participation in the life processes. He "acted out" his life to the rhythms of nature. Life was lived very close to the earth in a non-abstract way, and consequently there was little religious organization apart from various ceremonies which were merely facets of the general social structure.

The obvious social implications of primitive life were that the rituals provided the added value of reinforcing the solidarity of society and introducing the young to the norms of tribal culture. And since that was the primary purpose for such cultural activity, primitive religion "gives little leverage from which to change the world."<sup>14</sup>

### Archaic Religion

The next phase in man's evolutionary religious development is marked by an increasing characterization of mythical beings from which there begins to emerge true cult with all the trappings of cultic activity. The religious symbol system which appears is one in which these mythical beings are more objectified and become as gods. The world view is monistic as with primitive man, for there is still only one world, but it is becoming more highly differentiated. An archaic cosmology begins to develop in which the gods and man have their place, and the symbolic structure worked out now includes roles for priests and shamans.

In the area of religious action we find ritual becoming cult

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<sup>14</sup>Bellah, p. 29.

due to the felt distance between man and gods. There is a need for a communication system in which man and gods can interact. The process of sacrifice is one way in which archaic man seeks to effect a response from the divinity of the elements. So the religious situation is such that man knows a new found freedom apart from the mythical world about him but also must come to terms with an accompanying anxiety as to how the gods will respond to his cultic overtures.

Archaic man organized his society into a two-class system. Those in the upper-status group who handled the military and political functions of society also claimed the higher religious status. Cults multiplied throughout this period, and every sub-group had its own hierarchy. As political change occurred, it was necessary to rationalize this religiously. Struggles between rival groups were seen as related to jealousy between rival deities as well. According to Bellah, this kind of thinking can be observed in the early history of Israel, as well as the events surrounding the Trojan War. Basically put, the social implication of archaic man's increasingly differentiated cosmology became manifested in the rivalries between cults and deities for preeminence.

### Historic Religion

Literacy played a part in the evolvement of historic religion from the archaic, and as such, is relatively recent. When men began to grasp the power of language and proceeded to use words in new ways, their religious symbols changed dramatically. Literate man had gained

a new instrument with which he could triumph over previous limitations. It is in this sense that historic religions are considered by Bellah to be transcendental. The old monism has now collapsed and a new vision of reality is possible for man--he can reach beyond the concrete world and set up a symbol system that includes a supernatural realm and a life beyond death.

The symbol system here is dualistic. Man begins to focus on the hierarchical dimensions of existence. Salvation (or enlightenment) becomes the central religious preoccupation. And this concern transcends particularity of tribe or god, for even these may stand in the way of man's greater awareness of himself.

There evolved a new significance in ritual and sacrifice as religious action because man was now thought to be responsible for his salvation. He was becoming even more separated from the world but this was offset by the profound realization of his ability to participate in a new structure of reality. He was freer to be himself, but as before, he took on more responsibility for his salvation as he began to truly understand the ultimate nature of reality and sought to participate actively in it.

Bellah notes that "historic religion is associated with the emergence of differentiated religious collectivities as the chief characteristic of its religious organization."<sup>15</sup> By this he means that man began to see himself as the citizen of a divided universe,

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 34.



the hierarchical nature of which seemed both inspired and urgent. His dualistic frame of consciousness cut across his religious and political activities. One king which embodied both was no longer possible. Legitimizing political power came to be at tension with religious leadership.

The former two-class system changed to a four-class hierarchy characteristic of historic civilizations up to now. There arose a political-military elite, a cultural-religious elite, a rural lower-status group (peasantry), and an urban lower-status group of merchants and artisans. All four classes were predisposed to politics and religion but varied in terms of professional involvement.

The social implications of historic religions are based on the above stratification. There is a new level of tension and conflict implicit in the above kind of social structure out of which emerges confrontation and change.

Religion, then, provided the ideology and social cohesion for many rebellions and reform movements in the historic civilizations, and consequently played a more dynamic and especially a more purposive role in social change than had previously been possible.<sup>16</sup>

### Early Modern Religion

This next stage in the evolution of religious consciousness was largely related to the advent of the Protestant Reformation. While dualism remained a major feature of this era, the Reformation provided for the collapse of the hierarchical structuring of both this

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 35, 36.

and the other world. In its place came the possibility of a more direct access to salvation on the part of believers. No longer was it only mediated through the administrative church. The symbol structure which developed concentrated on the direct relation between the individual and transcendent reality. The authoritarian baggage so essential to a hierarchical model of either this world or the next was challenged and on a large scale abandoned. This is best seen in the Reformed change of Eucharistic meaning from a ritual of sacramental sacrifice to simply a commemorative reenactment of a once-and-for-all historical event.

Following this line of development, religious activity could be seen as a part of one's entire life. The emphasis became placed upon the individual's internal quality of devotion and less on the particular acts that had been previously termed "religious." Human activity in the world no longer became suspect, and man could deal directly with God through prayer and study of the Bible, for now he was truly capable of faith in his own right.

The social implications are that since the Protestant Reformation, the way has been paved for the development of the many man-oriented disciplines: economics, law, education, and the like. But probably the most obvious byproduct of the early modern religious environment has been the appearance of democracy and democratic institutions.

### Modern Religion

We now reach the stage of man's evolving religious awareness that is our own. Because we are looking at ourselves standing in the midst of a transitional period, it is more difficult to determine the marks of change. Here, I am presenting only a cursory view of the features that Bellah regards as significant indications of a new development in religious consciousness. The next section of this chapter will go into greater depth to describe what are the implications of Bellah's appraisal of our contemporary experience. The chapter will then end with a brief description of what is meant by "theopoetic expression," discussing why it is implied in all that has been said so far.

It is proposed by Bellah that the central feature of our current religious situation is "the collapse of the dualism that was so crucial to all the historic religions."<sup>17</sup> This is seen most clearly when we try to characterize the current religious symbolization. Indeed, our present symbol system may not be like any other time in that it is "characterized by a deepening analysis of the very nature of symbolization itself."<sup>18</sup> Because of the work of Kant, revealing the problematic nature of the metaphysical basis of all religions, more recent figures such as Paul Tillich ("ecstatic naturalism"), Rudolf Bultmann ("demythologization"), and Dietrich Bonhoeffer ("religionless Christianity") have reflected the modern tendency to move away from the

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 40      <sup>18</sup>Ibid.

classical "two-world" view of sacred and secular. Because of these intellectual advances,

...there is simply no room for a hierarchic dualistic religious symbol system of the classical historic type. This is not to be interpreted as a return to primitive monism: it is not that a single world has replaced a double one but that an infinitely multiplex one has replaced the simple duplex structure. It is not that life has become again a "one possibility thing" but that it has become an infinite possibility thing.<sup>19</sup>

For example, our culture is flooded with an information overload that gets more and more complex. Most major cities have several media centers that vie for the consumer's attention. Urban areas are inundated with two and sometimes three major newspapers, magazines and journals by the score, multi-channel television and cable networks, and movie theaters, which contend with one another to keep us abreast of all the information we need to be "with it" (probably meaning "with the current flow of culture").

Television is an especially powerful image-maker with a deep psychic influence that has not yet been fully realized. Reports show that a typical American 12-year-old has seen some 350,000 television commercials and knows most of them by heart. The all-pervading impact of this conditioning process comes home to us when our children blurt out commercial slogans at the dinner table or break into singing, "Double your pleasure, double your fun..." That religious symbolism has lost much of its own meaning is illustrated by the fact that TV commercials are unashamedly used to carry evangelistic content. There

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

are now thousands of bumper stickers bearing such messages as:

"The Bible: Try it, you'll like it!"

"Things go better with Jesus Christ!"

"You've got a lot to live..."

And Christ has got a lot to give!"

What strikes you most about these examples is that they indicate that in order to penetrate the modern mind, these religious images unashamedly piggyback on some television jingle which was previously used to sell a remedy for upset stomachs or a soft drink. Surely this adds tremendous weight to Robert Bellah's argument that the only thing to affirm about our present time is a "general search for an entirely new mode of religious symbolization..."<sup>20</sup>

It is a no less difficult task to put a finger on the religious action that prevails in our modern milieu. The sociologist makes one basic assertion that will have far-reaching implications for institutional Christianity. He says that "less than ever can man's search for meaning be confined to the church."<sup>21</sup> Already we have seen evidence of this. The "human potential movement," which provides newly developed tools for increasing man's awareness of his possibilities for social and personal maturity, is also beginning to venture into new ways for facilitating personal experience of the transcendent.

Another evidence that the search for meaning is not confined to the church, and one which is not as insignificant as it might seem, is the tendency to use week-ends for an exodus from city and home rather

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<sup>20</sup>Bellah, p. 41

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

than turn to suburban community and church as a center for need-satisfaction. As Vance Packard and others have recognized, the modern icon of escape seems to be the camper-truck. Increasingly seen in front of city and residential homes, the camper-truck symbolizes for the owner a way of retreat from all the problems that clamor for his attention--a kind of deus ex machina on wheels (literally a "god out of the machine" used for taking an actor out of the entanglements of the plot). News-men in Southern California even refer to their Friday evening reports as "news for Get-away Day."

Of course all this relates quite pointedly to modern religious organization. If what Bellah says is true, then the churches will not be able to carry on under the normal style of discipline and authoritarian control enjoyed in the past. The predominant flow of today's religious currents is toward the notion that each individual must

work out his own ultimate solutions and that the most the church can do is provide him a favorable environment for doing so, without imposing on him a prefabricated set of answers.<sup>22</sup>

For the church, this portends an increased flexibility of organizational structures, and new ways may have to be found for religious institutions to keep financially solvent with more fluid patterns of membership.

#### THE STRUGGLE FOR CULTURAL REBIRTH

All has not been said regarding the contemporary religious mood. Indeed, it will not be until many years have passed and our

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. 43, 44

successors gain sufficient perspective from which to view our modern situations as we now probe that of our ancestors. So it is proper that we refer to our present self-understanding as "emerging."

If Bellah is right, and the indications are that he is, humanity now feels an expanded sense of the universe and its latent potential. The old religious interpretations based on an outmoded dualism, symbolized in medieval languages and signs, will no longer be satisfactory. The way in which we now perceive reality simply does not permit us to see the earth and heaven as over-against each other.

Just how recent is this new sense of knowing our true place in the cosmic order? Eugene C. Kennedy suggests that the epochal event of men landing on the moon on a hot July afternoon in 1969 has, more than anything else, put an end to our Copernican logic that we were still the main attraction of the universe. To be sure, it will be difficult for people to surrender that notion, but the view of our planet by those astronauts on the moon, which Kennedy calls "earthrise," will do its part in changing our overall attitudes about heaven as the distance of God from man:

Men have stood on the moon and looked back at the earth, blotting it out to their own amazement with their thumbs, and allowing us to see that the earth is in rather than separate from the heavens. The television cameras that recorded the first earthrise did more than perform the technological marvel of taking the world's first self-portrait; they enabled us to see the truth that man lives in the stars and that there are no dividing lines in space.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Eugene C. Kennedy, The Return of Man (New York: Doubleday, 1973), p. 57

Kennedy may be right in saying that this one day will be counted as the "...first electric moment in which man recognized himself and his universe in a new and emotionally convinced manner,"<sup>24</sup> and that the old idea of a riven universe "is as broken as the biblical silver cord."<sup>25</sup> This event impressed on popular consciousness what was implicit in Copernicus.

But we are not settled with any sense of comfort into a cosmological framework completely free from some of the outmoded religious skeletons hiding in the dark closets of form and dogma. There is a wrenching quality to these times, and it is not felt more keenly than by those who realize the nature of the changes taking place in the modern world and yet do not want to abandon the Christian faith. As I shall discuss in the final portion of this paper, the burden is on the Church to see if she can begin to lead the way in interpreting and celebrating the possibilities of the dawning age.

Meanwhile, modern man is restless. He lives in a time of great inconstancy. Men and women seek new forms of connection, movement, and integrity of meaning to make sense out of their lives. As we have seen, Robert Bellah has noted the search for new modes of religious symbolization. Another important voice, Robert Jay Lifton, a professor of psychiatry at Yale University, calls this quest for images and symbols in new combination a "struggle for cultural rebirth."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid.      <sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>26</sup>Robert Jay Lifton, "The Struggle For Cultural Rebirth" Harpers, 246: 84-8 (April 1973)



He writes,

Poised at a confusing and liberating psychic brink, ready to plunge wildly ahead in an unknowable process devoid of clear destination, man suddenly finds, swirling about him, the total array of images created over the full course of his historical and evolutionary past. These images become an elusive form of psychic nutriment, to be ingested, metabolized, excreted, and above all, built upon and re-combined in a process of organic growth."<sup>27</sup>

In times before, we could rely on certain symbols and institutions to provide comforting guidelines and a prescribed life cycle. But no more. For we are passing through what Lifton calls a time of "severe historical dislocation" in which "these institutions and symbols--whether having to do with worship, work, learning, punishment, or pleasure--lose their power and psychological legitimacy. We still live in them, but they no longer live in us."<sup>28</sup> The opulence of materialism has been purchased at the cost of any ordinary feeling of transcendence. In this struggle for cultural rebirth, "innovation" is the word of the day. We suffer from no lack of new images, but stand bereft of any symbols which transform life at the most profound experiential levels. For, as Lifton writes, this is the goal of the re-symbolization process: "experiential transcendence."<sup>29</sup>

I have cited Bellah's notion that each individual today must work out his own ultimate solutions, and that the role of the Church is to facilitate this process. But how are we to characterize this

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 84      <sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 88.

individual in a time when such characterizations are elusive metaphors? We need to imagine him as someone who is himself transitional. Lifton has spoken of the emergence of "Protean Man,"<sup>30</sup> a kind of psychological style

a flux and flow of the self, or self-process--of what the young call "going through the changes" in an interminable series of experiments and explorations of varying depth, each of which may be readily abandoned in favor of still another psychological quest... a product of a convergence of history and evolution.<sup>31</sup>

This Protean Man is the central actor in the drama for cultural rebirth. He is the Innovator who will formulate the new symbols that shall speak of his personal and social experience. And he is also the Theopoet who shall mold the myths and shape the images that describe his experience of the Transcendent.

#### THE NEED FOR THEOPOETIC EXPRESSION

The premise under which I am writing is that theopoetic expression is a viable means for doing theology in the next few decades. As the word implies, theopoetics has to do with both God and cultural symbols. Hence it would have been impossible to formulate a definitive statement about theopoetics without first examining our contemporary cultural and religious situation, and how we arrived at this point.

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<sup>30</sup>For a full discussion of all that is implied here, read the chapter "Protean Man" in Robert Jay Lifton, History and Human Survival (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 317 ff.

<sup>31</sup>Lifton, "The Struggle For Cultural Rebirth," p. 84.

I have noted the many ways in which men throughout history have changed the symbol structure to better express his socio-religious experience. Religion is seen as the symbolic forms--myths, images and rituals--developed for this purpose. Culture is the composite of these creations and their meanings. The vernacular of these symbols have not only changed from generation to generation, but so has the culminative religious consciousness evolved through the passing of centuries.

The five stages of religious evolution which Robert Bellah sets forth as crystallized periods of historic symbol systems lead up to the great flux of our present time. It can only be described as a transitional moment marked by a "deepening analysis of the very nature of symbolization itself"<sup>32</sup> and a "general search for an entirely new mode of religious symbolization."<sup>33</sup>

What Robert Bellah has noticed from a sociological perspective, Robert Jay Lifton has observed as a psychologist. The latter has pointed out the psychic implications of modern man's search for images and institutions that will connect him with something meaningful, and even transcendent. Like Bellah, he sees our time as marked by the death of an old culture with a new culture struggling to be reborn. Protean Man is the adaptive citizen of this age of transition, the exile of the Old and the forerunner of the New.

Writing at the end of World War II, Arnold Toynbee, the eminent historian, suggested that the last half of the twentieth

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<sup>32</sup>Bellah, p. 40.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

century might well see the breakdown of Western civilization. Expressing some of the same thoughts as Bellah and Lifton, Toynbee adds a new dimension to this discussion--the dimension of hope. Something good will no doubt arise from all of the turmoil surrounding cultural decay. He writes,

While civilizations rise and fall and, in falling, give rise to others, some purposeful enterprise, higher than theirs may all the time be making headway, and in a divine plan, the learning that comes through the suffering caused by the failures of civilizations may be the sovereign means of progress. Abraham was an emigré from a civilization in disintegration; Christianity was born of the suffering of a disintegrating Graeco-Roman world. Will some comparable spiritual enlightenment be kindled in the 'displaced persons' who are the counterparts, in our world, of those Jewish exiles to whom so much was revealed in their painful exile by the waters of Babylon?<sup>34</sup>

While I shall not be so bold as to say that Christian Theopoetics is the purposeful enterprise making itself manifest in our time according to a divine plan, I do want to suggest that it may be the way that spiritual enlightenment might be kindled in the displaced persons in our world. For now is the convergence of man's cultural history and religious evolution. Both meet at the point of our contemporary experience. The result of this coming together in our time may be a new renaissance of spiritual depth, exceeding the old in range and depth, and only awaiting the birth of new forms for conceptualizing the Transcendent Reality. The plea here is for the development of theopoetic expression to show forth God in terms that modern culture can

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<sup>34</sup>Arnold Toynbee, Civilization On Trial (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 15.

apprehend.

Amos Wilder writes,

It is at the level of the imagination that the fateful issues of our new world experience must first be mastered. It is here that culture and history are broken, and here that the Church is polarized. Old words do not reach across new gulfs, and it is only in vision and oracle that we may chart the unknown...<sup>35</sup>

God is not explained; God is experienced. The Ultimate Reality is known in everyday reality or not at all. Even though some say the loss of any feeling of transcendence is so pervasive, and the symbolic processes are so polluted that we cannot envision any fabric of life as the pattern of God's activity, it may just be that we are not looking hard enough or in the right places. If there was anything distinctive about Jesus of Nazareth, it was that he called men to recognize the obvious: that life was replete with paradgms of spiritual truth. If God cannot bē seen, it is because we do not have "eyes to see," not that He is absent in any way. For us, this means that if God's voice is drowned out by the noisy din of jangling machinery building a "better world" in concrete and steel, don't blame God.

As Toynbee has hinted, a people in exile (or in Exodus?) are sometimes more apt to have intense spiritual experiences than when they were back in their dying homeland. The Israelites' passage through the desert after the Exodus was highlighted by various epiphanies assuring them of God's presence. We can and must seek God like Moses, not in

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<sup>35</sup>Amos N. Wilder, Grace Confounding (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. ix.

the old categories, but through the images of our present experience, however impotent they may seem.

Earth's crammed with heaven  
And every common bush afire with God  
But only he who sees takes off his shoes  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

--Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Every common bush, the lilies of the field, the birds in the air can all speak to us of God when seen through the eyes of a poet. If the predicament of modern man is that he is a "displaced person," a Protean Man in exile from a decaying culture, then the call is for men and women who will venture forth like Abraham, Moses, and Paul--Sarah, Miriam and Mary of Magdala to tell of their encounters with God in a doxology of wonder and thanksgiving.

The following are the reasons for a Christian theopoetic.

First, the plea for theopoetic expression takes seriously the present reappraisal of the whole process of symbolization. Cultural and religious symbols do evolve, change, become polluted and devoid of meaning from time to time. Only the poet recognizes that to relate an experience in such a way that it will speak to his contemporaries, he must not confine himself to the cultural forms of bygone days. Someone has said that the function of art is threefold: Art teaches us to SEE; it teaches us WHAT to see; and it teaches us to see MORE THAN WE SEE. There is so much of God's presence to be seen in what is experienced, but it is only the artist who can adequately celebrate for others all that lies behind the mundane appearance of things.

Secondly, a theopoetic takes seriously the roles of vision and oracle, of myth and ritual in shaping the structures of faith and confession. So much of discursive theology has been unable to do more than parallel the frustrations of society. The theological work of the last ten years has read too easily a Christian theology of hope in the secular promises of scientific technology. Stranded on an island in the nineteenth century liberalism, with no way to swim the swift currents of change or chart their direction, the theology that could not challenge the times sought to hope for the promise of tomorrow. It was Harvey Cox who shined the light of understanding through the back-alleys of the "secular city" only a decade ago. He taught us then how to celebrate the post-industrial age, to rejoice in the breaking of all supernatural myths and sacred symbols. Now modern technology has plasticized our symbols and myths into counterfeit replicas of the real thing. In the era after the "death of God" we ask how we can deal in theological categories when there is not the surety of God's evidences, when our sacred images are shattered, and our erudite friends tell us that God is intellectually superfluous, emotionally dispensable, and morally intolerable anyway. The answer is that "religious communication must overcome a long addiction to the discursive, the rationalistic, the dogmatic and prosaic."<sup>36</sup> Now is the time to turn to our poets and artisans.

The third reason for turning to the poet to help us see through

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<sup>36</sup>Wilder, "Theology and Theopoetic," p. 593.

our contemporary experience to the ultimate values of its meaning is related to the mystical nature of art. Like the mystic, a good poet has the ability to get straight through to the deeper levels of existence. In an article written for the New York Times, a professor of humanities wrote:

If you went around in England in 1770 asking people how it felt to be living in an age of Industrial Revolution, most people would not know what you were talking about. But if you went to see the "lunatic" William Blake living in obscurity, he would tell you about the meaning of the great cultural transformation.

...From a few eighteenth century brick kilns he was able to extrapolate imaginatively the complete transformation of human society.

Imaginative artists like Blake can understand the collective condition of society because the imagination is itself the opening to the collective unconscious; and precisely because this consciousness is collective imaginative people can think the same thoughts at the same time even though they are separated by ordinary space.<sup>37</sup>

The mystic mind is open to "the beyond within," much as a poet through his intuitive senses, can see the sacred in the profane, and lift it up for others to appreciate. It is not odd that such a "lunatic" as Blake could chart the yet unknown implications of industrialization from the smallest evidences, for the same perceptivity can help us

To see a World in a grain of sand  
And a Heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And eternity in an hour.

--William Blake

"Auguries of Innocence"

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<sup>37</sup>William Irwin Thompson, "Beyond Contemporary Consciousness I and II," New York Times, (May 10, 11, 1971), editorial page; quoted in Andrew Weil, Natural Mind (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), p. 186



The fourth potential of theopoetics is its ability to help Protean Man gain confidence in his future, to regain a new sense of connectedness with meaning. With the furor of the sixties over, most Americans entered the new decade of the seventies with a feeling of anomie: shellshocked by all the unforeseen changes in traditional values and afraid to project what might lie ahead. Not uncharacteristic of similar periods in our history marked by national indecision and disorientation, the past few years have included a reversion to nostalgia--a quest to find out who we are by reflecting on where we used to be. It is not surprising that the American religious scene found the Jesus People successful at offering youth who had tried everything else a chance to return to the well defined limits of a simplistic faith.

To many, the future is not only dim, but totally indistinct. No longer are we able to frame bright promises of tomorrow because of the disappointing realities of today. Fredrick Sontag, who with John K. Roth has surveyed our nation's cultural history and religious experience, has conjectured that psychic upheavals today may result from the

painful sense that the future we waited for so long is now here, but it is not very different from the situation of other men all over the globe...If the American Dream is now realized, it has too many aspects of a nightmare for comfort.<sup>38</sup>

A rediscovery of theopoetic means for apprehending God's incarnating

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<sup>38</sup>Frederick Sontag and John K. Roth, The American Religious Experience (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 285

purposes can teach us how to experience him in such times of desolation and anxiety. Today God may be experienced as a pressure and a wounding from which we would love to be free. We may not be seeing God in the positive terms of descriptive theological language, but rather in the judgmental terms of the Job and Jonah, and we want to run. Once again seeing God in images, signs and symbols of the present, will indicate various future possibilities. But we must begin with now, with such new structures, artistic cults and lifestyles as are taking shape.

The fifth reason for turning to theopoetic form is that we have come to a stage in our religious consciousness where we may speak of the "psychotheological" nature of human experience. This is to say that the workings of the mind and the mysteries of divine reality are not polarized but integrated. There are psychodynamic principles at work in the liturgies, stories, parables, and credal formulations that are of inestimable importance for the human condition.

In this regard, special attention shall be given to the psychology of Carl Jung, whose contribution to modern theological work has not yet been realized. Jung's therapeutic strategy is essentially that of illuminating ordinary experience with the light of the mythical, or rather allowing the mythical to speak for itself from the depths of human consciousness. His methodology, which is not dissimilar to the theopoetic process, is to show that in every bit of ordinary existence there lie the great laws, the great images and symbols. The transcendent is known in the apparently accidental. By nourishing personal reflection, the archetypal emerges.

Jung, through his empirical observations, came to see that his patients were torn between the physical world, of which they were almost too aware, and the nonphysical world, of which they were sometimes totally unconscious. He noticed that the modern world, drenched in nineteenth century rationalism and materialistically oriented, was unable to deal with the nonphysical realm as it impinged upon his consciousness through dreams, intuitions, and psychic disturbances.

Philosophically, at least, it can be suggested that some of these psychic contents are equivalent to what mystics have known as an encounter with divine reality. But the skepticism with which they are met causes these symbols to be regarded as abnormal or even paranormal phenomena. Jung noted that there is among most people a "systematic blindness" which is the effect of "a prejudice that deity is outside man."<sup>39</sup> Suppose then, that these inner "spiritual" experiences are just as real as our sense experience of the material world. It could well be that the world of images and intuitions, phantasies and dreams, myths and numinous feelings have an autonomous validity all their own and are to be taken seriously as manifestations of the Divine.

What this means for theopoetics is that modern research and investigation into the nature of human consciousness reveals to modern man what the primitives acted upon in their primal naivete': that the mind works symbolically and God (or the numinous) reveals his presence within existence in the only meaningful way--on the level of man's

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<sup>39</sup>Carl Jung, Psychology of Religion (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 72.

imagination.

The sixth and final reason we need to turn to theopoetic expression is related to the nature of the church. We noted previously Robert Bellah's observation that increasingly, the quest for meaning will not be confined to the church. Individuals will seek to interpret ultimacy for themselves, but that the church can help this process.

How then shall we view the church? Seen in theopoetic terms, the church must be open to the movement of the Spirit as it manifests itself in archetypal symbols that are intuitively grasped by human consciousness. As a Community of Faith, the Christian church seeks to perceive "God-meanings:" as a Community of Belief, the church seeks to receive the message implicit in their content; and finally, as the Body of Christ, the church seeks to become herself, the mode of theopoetic expression—the transceiver wherein like Christ himself, the message is known through the medium. This is the model of ministry inherent in St. Paul's proclamation: "For I delivered to you...what I also received, that Christ..."<sup>40</sup>

Unfortunately for the church, and sadly for society as well, the people of God who have perceived, have been satisfied with receiving, of being the receptical for God's grace and not the vehicle for its transmission. Amos Wilder suggests that the church needs to regain her sense of imagination, necessary for

...all profound knowing and celebration; all remembering,

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<sup>40</sup>I Cor. 11:23.

realizing and anticipation; all faith, hope and love. When imagination fails, doctrine becomes ossified, witness and proclamation wooden, doxologies and litanies empty, consolations hollow and ethics legalistic.

It is at the level of imagination that any full engagement with life takes place.<sup>41</sup>

As Morton Kelsey explains so well, the Gospel was spread by a group of rather common men who dared to have some rather uncommon experiences in their lives. The leaders of the early church were outlaws of society who "experienced breakthroughs of power that astounded the ancient world."<sup>42</sup> As Paul makes quite implicit to the church at Rome:

For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has wrought through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>43</sup>

In the final chapter, I shall outline the theopoetic ministry of the modern church, and attempt to show how the Christian experience can become manifested in power "by word and deed, by signs and wonders..."

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<sup>41</sup>Wilder, *Theology and Theopoetic*, p. 593.

<sup>42</sup>Morton Kelsey, *Encounter With God* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1972), p. 219.

<sup>43</sup>Rom. 15:18.

## Chapter 2

### THE DIMENSIONS OF A CHRISTIAN THEOPOETIC

In the previous chapter I have pointed to the need for doing theology in the idiom of theopoetic. Here I shall chart what I believe to be the dimensions of a Christian theopoetic.

One significant aspect of the turmoil of the sixties was a tremendous upheaval within the Roman Catholic Church. The self examination and sweeping changes of Vatican II were not enough to dispel the anxiety of many priests and nuns for whom mother Church had become too senile to relate effectively to contemporary needs. Many left the professional ministry in rebellion and disgust. One of the first to articulate the ecclesiastical and religious crisis as he saw it from his own perspective was Father James Kavanaugh, who wrote of his frustrations in the popular book, A Priest Looks At His Outdated Church.

Since that time, Kavanaugh has found poetry his chosen vehicle for expressing pent-up feelings about his life since leaving the Church. In an early book of poems which he says was "born in the excitement of the continuing search for meaning,"<sup>1</sup> he includes a poem which reflects his theological past. Titled "My Easy God is Gone,"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>James Kavanaugh, There Are Men Too Gentle To Live Among Wolves (Los Angeles: Nash, 1970), p. i.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 4ff.

the poem may capture the mood of Protean Man in the seventies as he discovers the ineptitude of outworn religious symbols to carry the full force of meaning they once did. He writes:

Now my easy God is gone--he knew too  
much to be real,  
He talked too much to listen, he knew  
my words before I spoke.  
But I knew his answers as well-computerized  
and turned to dogma  
His stamp was on my soul, his law locked  
cross-like on my heart,  
His imperatives tatooed on my breast, his  
aloofness canonized in ritual.

Now he is gone--my easy, stuffy God--God  
the father-master, the mother-whiner, the  
Dull, whoring God who offered love bought  
by an infant's fear.  
Now the world is mine with all its pain and  
warmth, with its every color and sound;  
The setting sun is my priest with the ocean  
for its altar.  
The rising sun redeems me with the rolling  
waves warmed in its arms.  
A dog barks and I weep to be alive, a cat  
studies me and my joy is boundless.  
I lie on the grass and boy-like, search the sky.  
The clouds do not turn to angels, the winds  
do not whisper of heaven or hell.

Perhaps I have no God--what does it matter?  
I have beauty and joy and transcending loneliness,  
I have the beginning of love--as beautiful as it is  
feeble--as free as it is human.  
I have mountains that whisper secrets  
held before men could speak,  
I have the ocean that belches life on  
the beach, and caresses it in the sand.  
I have a friend who smiles when he sees me,  
who weeps when he hears my pain,  
I have a future full of surprises, a  
present full of wonder.  
I have no past--the steps have disappeared  
the wind has blown them away.

I stand in the Heavens and on earth, I  
 feel the breeze in my hair.  
 I can drink to the North Star and shout  
 on a bar stool,  
 I can feel the teeth of a hangover, the  
 joy of laziness,  
 The flush of my own rudeness, the surge of  
 my own ineptitude.  
 And I can know my own gentleness as well,  
 my wonder, my nobility.  
 I sense the call of creation, I feel its  
 swelling in my hands.  
 I can lust and love, eat and drink, sleep  
 and rise,  
 But my easy God is gone--and in his stead  
 the mystery of loneliness and love!

Some might agree, "perhaps he has no God." But my reply is to  
 ask: how could he feel all that he feels and not know the One who makes  
 Himself known in all that Kavanaugh now is free to experience? To be  
 sure, his "easy God is gone," but in its place is the God who is more  
 difficult to know, the evasive God of Old and New Testaments, the God  
 who is known in the "mystery of loneliness and love!"

It is my contention that when men and women give poetic ex-  
 pression to their intimate encounter with the world where "deep calls  
 to deep," God is made known. All that this implies will become  
 evident as we look at the threefold dimensions of a Christian theo-  
 poetic. First we shall describe the THEOLOGICAL dimension, followed by  
 the POETIC, and finally say what is specifically the CHRISTIAN appli-  
 cation of theopoetic expression.

#### THE THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION

1. The THEOLOGICAL dimension of a Christian theopoetic means an experientially responsive way of doing theology



In the poem quoted above we find a vivid example of the contrast between Kavanaugh's childhood view of God--His answers computerized and turned to dogma, His aloofness and canonized ritual--and Kavanaugh's later experiences of life in all its multi-faceted richness. On the one hand is the Church's theology sacked of imagination and turned plastic, while on the other we note the ebullient images with which all of life is celebrated, despite the unconnectedness of each fragile event.

Such words tend to evoke an "Amen!" in us all, for who has not shared such feelings? But can God be found in such "secular" events? Not to say "Yes" is to ignore the incarnational aspect of the Christian affirmation. It is to deny the experience of the numinous, the feeling of "awe" known by all persons at different times. And we must retain this sense of "awe" which Kavanaugh seems to celebrate.

James Angell reminds us:

Awe is our final protection. In a time when we seem to be experiencing disenchantment with ourselves, as man accepts more of the world as his responsibility and the arc of God's responsibility seems to grow rapidly less, we can be saved from despair and the feeling that we are living in a deserted universe by awe. An age without awe is an age of unrelieved anxiety.<sup>3</sup>

If we lose touch with the feeling of awe in our experience, then there will be no mysteries left to discover and the drama of God will no longer be seen unfolding in such symbols as a "star and stable, shepherds, a troubled husband, a mystified young mother-in-waiting, a busy

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<sup>3</sup>James W. Angell, Put Your Arms Around the City (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Revell, 1970), p. 105.

inkeeper, astrologers from the East, and a Baby Boy who beomes true man."<sup>4</sup>

The need in our time is for an experientially responsive theology which recognizes once again that God is existentially apprehended, that the religious quest is one of awareness. Alfred Whitehead describes the process this way:

Religion is the vision of something which stands beyond, behind, and within, the passing flux of immediate things; something which is real, and yet waiting to be realized; something which is a remote possibility, and yet the greatest of present facts; something that gives meaning to all that passes, and yet is beyond all reach; something which is the ultimate ideal, and the hopeless quest.<sup>5</sup>

To refer to God in a secular fashion is to lift up this vision as it stands out in everyday experience, even as Kavanaugh, the poet, has done.

2. The THEOLOGICAL dimension of a Christian theopoetic means that "God-language" is the language of symbol and metaphor.

The theopoetic task is not so much concerned with describing and defining God--which is one proper task of theology--but to observe the "many and various ways God has spoken..." to humanity and thereby discover clues to His nature as they pour forth in our experience. Therefore, we prefer not to look at Theology in terms of theo-poesis" (the creative communication of a God-experience).

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 104

<sup>5</sup>Alfred North Whitehead, Science and the Modern World (New York: New American Library, 1948), p. 191.

In his book, The Edges of Language, Paul M. Van Buren argues that it is impossible to know anything beyond what language can tell us, and that when we ignore the limits of language, as in a theistic interpretation of Christianity,

...such words as "God," "transcendent," "ultimate," and "eternal" are thought to refer to that which lies beyond human life and experience. Religion, so misunderstood, consequently presumes to go beyond language, rather than be content to hover right at the limits of what we are able to say.<sup>6</sup>

Is there, then no way of talking to God? Are we left to merely wish we could say more? Such a view as Van Buren sets forth is the culmination of what Amos Wilder called a "long addiction to the discursive, the rationalistic, the dogmatic and the prosaic,"<sup>7</sup> and what William Ferm has simply referred to as "language loving."<sup>8</sup> The aim of a Christian theopoetic is not to compile words about God, but to proclaim the creative dynamics of God as they are apprehended in the wonder of existential awareness. "Poetry," Theodore Roszak has stated, "is the therapeutic subversion of language by language; it is language doctoring its worst disease of literalism with the medicine of symbolic play."<sup>9</sup> Even Van Buren sees that poetry cannot be translated

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<sup>6</sup>Paul M. Van Buren, The Edges of Language (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 151.

<sup>7</sup>Amos N. Wilder, "Theology and Theopoetic," Christian Century, XC: 21 (May 23, 1973), 593.

<sup>8</sup>William Ferm, "Taking God Seriously (With the Help of William James)," Christian Century, XC: 21 (May 23, 1973), 596.

<sup>9</sup>Theodore Roszak, Where The Wasteland Ends, (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 59

into prose without moving us away from where the poet was standing.

We shall no longer feel his difficulties, nor see his discoveries, nor share his vision if we will not move with him to the farthest edges of language.<sup>10</sup>

My disagreement with Van Buren begins here. For while it may seem only a semantic problem, a poem actually does move beyond the limits of language whenever it becomes a symbol. Language is basically a system of sign-communication. True, a symbol and a sign are similar in that they both point beyond themselves to something else. But the difference, as Tillich has pointed out, is that

...signs do not participate in any way in the reality and power of that to which they point. Symbols, although they are not the same as that which they symbolize, participate in its meaning and power. The difference between a symbol and sign is the participation in the symbolized reality which characterized the symbols, and the non-participation in the "pointed to" reality which characterizes a sign.<sup>11</sup>

The limits of language, as I see it, come at the point at which a word-sign or a combination of word-signs together point to that which they represent and can do no more. An example of this would be to say,

"The fog moves in each night."

But the moment you phrase words in such a way that they go beyond pointing to "something and begin to evoke a participation" in the reality to which they point, then communication has moved beyond the edges of language and into the region of symbol. An example of this

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<sup>10</sup>Van Buren, p. 106

<sup>11</sup>Paul Tillich, Theology and Culture, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 54,55.

might be,

Fog whistles  
Far away  
Mooing like cattle  
As the night  
Dissolves in watersmoke  
The sea comes in  
To look around  
Disguised as  
Mr. Fog<sup>12</sup>

In the above poem, we no longer have language communication, but poetry: symbols used for pointing, not signs for pointing. Non-discursive symbol and metaphor is a proper God-language because only a symbol can participate in the meaning of reality.

3. The THOLOGICAL dimension of a Christian theopoetic means that to "image" God in symbol and metaphor is to find correspondence with the archetypal nature of human consciousness.

Why is it that the idea of God finds any validity in the human mind? What is it about religious experiences that they resonate so resoundingly in the depths of the human psyche? Answers to these questions are the aim of this section, for it is my position that the intuitive aspect of the human mind provides the mode of consciousness suitable for apprehending the experience of God. To approach this task, let us look briefly at the theories proposed by two eminent modern empiricists, Marcea Eliade and Carl Jung.

It is the thesis of Marcea Eliade that there is a strict dialectic between the sacred and the profane. The two appear to be in

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<sup>12</sup>Mason Williams, "Fourth of December Fog Poem," in his The Mason Williams Reading Matter, (New York: Doubleday 1969), p. 48.

opposition to each other. Whenever the sacred becomes known, it is known as a totally different reality from that of the profane. It breaks through the secular and is experienced as a mystery before which one stands in awe. Because the sacred manifests itself differently than "natural" realities do, it is difficult to describe. Discursive language naively seeks to explain the experience, but cannot. Therefore, the closest one can come in describing the "numinous" is through analogical terminology.

Man becomes aware of the sacred when it breaks in, or manifests itself in the profane. Eliade designates the term hierophany "to designate the act of manifestation of the sacred...it expresses no more than is implicit in its etymological content, i.e., that something sacred shows itself to us."<sup>13</sup> As he has illustrated so well in his book, Patterns in Comparative Religion,<sup>14</sup> the religious experiences of cultures as they are given form in myths, symbols, and rites, are rather similar despite immense historical differences.

The sacred never ceases to manifest itself in spontaneous hierophanies. The process of sacralizing reality always remains the same, but the forms of sacralization may differ to a certain extent as they make their impressions on man's religious consciousness. Eliade explains it this way:

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<sup>13</sup>Marcea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), p. 11.

<sup>14</sup>Marcea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958)

...the very dialectic of the sacred tends indefinitely to repeat in a series of archetypes, so that a hierophany realized at a certain "historical moment" is structurally equivalent to a hierophany a thousand years earlier or later, the same paradoxical sacralization of reality ad infinitum is what, after all, enables us to understand something of a religious phenomenon and to write its "history."<sup>15</sup>

We have already noted this to be the case in our study of the evolution of human religious consciousness. The constancy of the sacred has been understood in varying ways throughout history, and expressed in diverse forms. Here, however, Eliade is telling us that there is a structural similarity between the forms of each hierophany and others years before or to come. They continue, he says, in a series of archetypes, and it is at this point that we catch a clue as to why this is so. But to follow up on this clue, we must turn to the important work of Dr. Carl Jung.

The Swiss psychologist proposes that we see the dynamics underlying the life of a culture as essentially psychic events. If one follows a functional approach in studying a given culture and studies the role that particular beliefs play in the total frame of reference of the society, there is always the further question of what are the inner experiences that implement these beliefs. A functional interpretation of culture leads directly to the need for a close look at the psychic dimensions of various symbolic forms. Jung seeks to trace symbols back into the psyche to find their psychic meaning.

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<sup>15</sup>Marcea Eliade, Shamanism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. xvii.

Psychic processes, Jung suggests, are basically the same in all peoples, no matter what period of history under consideration. These inner, psychological processes will be expressed in symbols with an underlying similarity, which he calls "archetypes:"

All the powerful ideas in history go back to archetypes. This is particularly true of religious ideas, but the central concepts of science, philosophy, and ethics are no exception to this rule. In their present form they are variants of archetypal ideas, created by consciously applying and adapting these ideas to reality. For it is the function of consciousness not only to recognize and assimilate the external world through the gateway of the sense, but to translate into visible reality the world within us.<sup>16</sup>

And so it would appear that man is a creature who depends almost entirely upon revelation--a disclosure of the divine ideas and the sacred forms through which God is known. Each new age may find worshippers at some new altar, but each altar appears to be dedicated to the same archetypal sacred power.

And so we learn that it is the inward experience of a symbol or hierophanic expression of God that is crucial to the religious experience. The power that a certain image carries is related to its archetypal nature. When, for instance, a certain image of God resonates affirmatively deep in the human psyche, there may be a correspondence of that symbol with the archetypal image of God fused in the deepest reaches of the mind. As Jung has written,

...when I say as a psychologist that God is an archetype, I mean by that the "type" in the psyche. The word "type" is, as we

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<sup>16</sup>Carl Jung, Psychological Reflections (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 39



know, derived from the Greek tupos, "blow" or "imprint;" thus an "archetype presupposes an imprinter."<sup>17</sup>

This highly interesting statement is especially helpful in understanding Christian theopoetic expression, for it gives validity to the use of analogue, symbol and metaphor as appropriate forms of communicating the experience of God's contact with men in history.

### THE POETIC DIMENSION

The theological dimension of Christian theopoetics is that God speaks to us through hierophanies, through images and symbols which are confronted within secular life, but point us toward the sacred. A theopoetic is an experiential means of doing theology in that it takes seriously the human encounter with the divine in the existential realities of living. And finally, I have described the archetypal nature of certain images of God, which, because of the way in which they are imprinted on the foundation of human consciousness, have great power. Having then suggested how the mind responds to symbols, I want to delineate in this section what is meant by poetic symbolization.

1. The POETIC dimension refers to "poesis," the wider sphere of communication which utilizes symbols to carry meaning.

Colin Wilson has stated that "all art is humanity's attempt to capture the affirmation experience so it can be re-created."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 38,39.

<sup>18</sup>Colin Wilson, Poetry and Mysticism (San Francisco: City Lights, 1969), p. 37.

While this statement could include such common feelings as romance and the thrill of watching a beautiful sunset, it also refers to the human encounter with the sacred. God not only speaks to man through symbolic forms, but man cannot adequately share this experience with others except through poetic imagery.

When I speak of poetic dimension of a Christian theopoetic, I do not mean that our discussion shall be limited to poetry alone. The term "poetic" is to be seen in the wider meaning of "poesis" (from the Greek poiein, meaning to make, to create). One cannot communicate the depth of religious experience without creating an appropriate form which comes close to reproducing a kind of archetypal resonance in the consciousness of another. For as we have seen, symbols are the key-notes of human experience because "symbolization is the essential act of mind."<sup>19</sup> This includes any form of artistic expression, whether it is dance, ritual, poetry, storytelling, preaching, painting, sculpture, etc.

One of the reasons this is an important consideration is the fact that an artist must always seek the appropriate symbol to share his poetic insight. As Paul Valery has written,

A poet's function--do not be startled by this remark--is not to experience the poetic state, that is a private affair. His function is to create it in others.<sup>20</sup>

The ability of man to conceive--yes, even the power to create, for

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<sup>19</sup>Suzanne Langer, Philosophy in a New Key (New York: New American Library, 1942), p. 47

<sup>20</sup>Cited in W. C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 376

that is what essentially separates us from the animal world--is a tremendous asset. Beyond the original affirmation experience itself, nothing is more exciting than being able to create that same sense of awe in others. In primitive cultures, there was a special group of people who were elite simply because they carried the secret of this power. Though the creative tools might differ today from those of the magicians, shamans and priests of other eras, we still attribute great honor to those of our own time who can inspire within us the thrilling and terrifying experiences they have known. Society will continually turn to the great writers, poets, orators, film makers, painters and even preachers who have shown an ability to keep us in touch with the depth of our human experience.

2. The POETIC dimension recognizes that all experience is a gift to be opened.

One of the profound changes that has taken place over the centuries is that men and women have slowly lost touch with their ability to trust in their own experience. Ours has become an existence where experience is increasingly mediated through others. Culture is the embodiment of a people's shared reality. But largely through the growth in mass media communications, a disproportionate amount of a person's immediate experience is becoming filtered (unconsciously at least) by the culture's shared reality.

Who of us cannot say that we are so totally massaged by dependence on commercial audio and visual media for our information that we sometimes distrust the reliability of our own senses? Years ago

the nation chuckled at the veracity of a report about a rural mid-western town that was rapidly flooding, but whose citizenry did not quickly evacuate. Many of the residents, it was said, were glued to their television sets watching a small community become inundated by water, but could not believe it was their own. I too, used to laugh at such a possibility until an event took place some time ago that sobered my judgment. What happened to me then has happened again and again, and others have reported the same phenomenon.

I was sitting in the stands watching an important football game when the quarterback dropped back and threw a perfect pass to the split end which resulted in an 85 yard touchdown play. Even though I had just watched it, to my amazement I didn't believe for sure that it had really happened and I suddenly caught myself waiting for the INSTANT REPLAY! But they were kicking the extra point and the pass that went for a bomb was now only part of my memory. Here I was, supposedly enjoying a great football game, when I suddenly had the strange feeling that unless I could see the same play again from five or six different angles, my memory couldn't be trusted to have recorded the event as REAL! Quite simply put: Unless television reports it, it didn't happen! This increasing trust in a "mediated experience," as opposed to an "immediate experience" is so important to some people that they think it not odd at all to take a battery operated TV set to a game to verify what their senses have indicated.

The personal anecdote related above is attributed to what can be called an electronic mindscape, but it has its equivalent in our wider technocratic society. One of the contributing factors to our

contemporary sense of historical dislocation has been giving science and technical ingenuity carte blanche power over our minds and our souls. In the words of Theodore Roszak, we have assumed

that the transcendent aspirations of mankind can be, and must be translated into purely secular equivalents; that culture--if it is to be cleansed of superstition and reclaimed for humanitarian values--must be wholly entrusted to the mindscape of scientific rationality.<sup>21</sup>

When reality is determined by others' experimentation, the cost is always the loss of personal immediate experience, and it is no wonder that our blind confidence in technology has brought us to the "ecological cul de sac" we find ourselves confronting.

One hopeful sign, emerging first from the counter culture, but now spreading into every kind of lifestyle, is that people will no longer turn over to machines (or men who think like machines) the transcendent aspirations of mankind. Many in our society are trying to learn once again to trust in their own intuition. Others, unfortunately, have forgotten how, or don't know what it feels like and are afraid to let it happen. So they go to places like Esalen to learn to see, touch, and hear someone else beyond the superficial level of awareness. Some are turning to Eastern religious disciplines which place a high emphasis on cutting through the maya, the appearance of things, and searching for the inner essence of reality. And still others have rediscovered artistic sensitivity, the awareness of the depth of life's meaning which can be celebrated through

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<sup>21</sup>Roszak, p. 178.

a multitude of art forms.

But the lesson is always the same: EXPERIENCE IS A GIFT TO BE OPENED! Life is a kind of packaged "event," which unwrapped, is truly seen and heard and smelled and touched by those who can appreciate its value. The poetic dimension of a Christian theopoetic suggests that the artist is aware of the transcendent depth of human experience and can open up this gift to others.

### 3. The POETIC DIMENSION recognizes the mystical quality of art

Sing of human unsuccess  
In a rapture of distress;  
In the deserts of the heart  
Let the healing fountain start.  
In the prison of his days,  
Teach the free man how to praise.

-- W. H. Auden

(from) "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"

These lines of Auden keynote what is meant by the mystical quality of art. Poetic expression truly liberates the human psyche at the deepest levels. The poet and the mystic see the human predicament as that of a "free man" in a kind of psychological imprisonment. True art instills a kind of mystic consciousness as it releases us from bondage to our repressive egos and teaches us to praise.

A story that floated around in the early Forties about the Hitler regime is illustrative at this point. A German comedian used to make fun of the Nazis in his act; he would snap to attention and shout "Heil..., uh, Heil...;" then a puzzled expression would cross his face and he would mutter: "What the hell's his name?" This was reported to Hitler, who sent for the comedian, and made him do his

act in front of the Nazis top brass. But they would all sit there with frozen faces; not one of them cracked a smile when the comedian presented the punch line. As the story goes, the lesson had served its purpose, for the comedian stopped rendering jokes about the Nazis.

Let this example stand for the way in which an adult formulates his attitudes toward experience. WE decide what is funny and what isn't; what is good and what is bad. WE maintain the privilege of reacting to a poem or a work of art and decide if it is evocative enough to prompt an appropriate response. Most of the time we remain detached, captive to the thought that we are being manipulated by the artist's clever devices however good they might be. But once in a while a comedian is so funny that it becomes impossible not to smile or even laugh uncontrollably. Once in a while a film is so moving that it becomes impossible not to cry or reflect upon my existential situation. There are those times when our subjective interplay with the ultimate conditions of experience is such that we cease being judge and critic and become involved in the reality itself. Such is the quality of mysticism and inspired art.

T. E. Lawrence has written of himself:

I...lamented myself most when I saw a soldier with a girl or a man fondling a dog, because my wish was to be as superficial and as perfected, and my jailer held me back.<sup>22</sup>

It's as if each of us has a jailer, a level of our personality that holds us back from drinking deeply of the moment--from knowing the power of its intoxication. Colin Wilson suggests that "all good art

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<sup>22</sup>Wilson, p. 16.

has this power of reaching past the jailer, and pressing the 'OFF' button."<sup>23</sup> When our self consciousness is turned off, then we are free to become aware of the ultimate conditions of life. We are open to deeper levels of reality that were there all the time, but en-crustured under layers of meaninglessness.

It is the nature of deepest reality that it cannot be uncovered by human consciousness except through symbolic "re-present-ation." I take this to be the meaning of the ancient saying, "no one could look in the face of God and live." Paul Tillich, in his Theology of Culture,<sup>24</sup> says that religious symbols have the same function as all symbols in opening up levels of reality that might otherwise remain hidden, but with one difference. Religious symbols reveal a dimension of reality which is the ground of every other dimension--the fundamental level, the level of being itself.

Religious symbols are taken from the infinity of material which the experienced reality gives us. Everything in time and space has become at some time in the history of religion a symbol for the Holy.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, if mysticism is "the spiritual form of the power of space over time,"<sup>26</sup> then it follows that to come into contact (communion) with ultimate reality through symbols, it is indeed a mystical experience.

Theopoetic communication which takes seriously the power of symbolization to bring one into the presence of ultimate reality is,

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<sup>23</sup>Wilson p. 16.

<sup>24</sup>Tillich, pp. 58-67.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 34.



therefore, quite mystical. The time is right for a renewed emphasis on this form of God-language, for there is a great hunger, not only for discovery of meaningful symbols that relate to the depths of existence, but also for a discovery of a personal mysticism that allows for the unmediated experience of the self with the ground of being. This is a subject that shall be handled in greater detail in the next chapter.

### THE CHRISTIAN DIMENSION

I have written at length about the need for relating to God in poetic terms, for capturing the meaning of ultimate reality in symbol and metaphor. It has not been my intention to imply that theopoetic expression is entirely a new concept; it is the oldest means of giving form to the religious stirrings of the human soul. But now I want to begin to describe what is meant by a Christian poetic. In this section I shall begin a discussion of what I believe to be the unique Christian affirmation about God and the symbolization process involved. Hopefully, the discussion will come to fruition in the last two chapters where I shall set forth a pragmatic application of Christian theopoetic witness and discipline.

#### 1. The CHRISTIAN dimension recognizes that Jesus related to his world in theopoetic terms

Jesus viewed the world around him as symbolic; that is, all of life points to God if we could know it. He recognized that God as the transcendent Reality breaks through in the common reality we all experience. As H. Richard Niebuhr has pointed out, man is in history as

a fish is in water, and

...what we mean by the revelation of God can be indicated only as we point through the medium in which we live...Since all men are in nature, though their histories vary,...we may be able to direct them to the God we mean in preaching and worship by pointing as Jesus did to the rain, the sun, the sparrows and the lilies of the field, or to these subtler wonders which microscope and telescope and even more refined instruments of intelligence discover in the common world.<sup>27</sup>

Niebuhr is saying that Jesus did not seek to carry on discursive dialogues with his audiences, speculating on the essential nature of God as if that could be reduced to some complex metaphysical formula. Jesus was one who learned from his experiences of others, and he observed the dynamics of the natural world around him.

Jesus was a poet. Poetic language holds and contains the awareness of the deeper levels of existence and creates in the hearer his own awareness of these deeper levels, the result being an expanded consciousness. It is only our creative poets and artists who are able to help us gain a kind of intimacy with the ineffable, who with old words and familiar illustrations, brings us into a participation with ultimate truths. The parables and metaphors which Jesus used had this creative power.

Andrew Young, himself a poet, became enamored by the poetic aspects of the Nazarene, and wrote a book entitled The Poetic Jesus. In it he displays a fascination at the many metaphors Jesus must have gathered in his thirty years which were later brought into use as he

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<sup>27</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation (New York: Macmillan, 1941), p. 48.

spoke to his followers. Young notes how the boy must have watched closely the domestic chores of father and mother in their small one-room home. The salt which came from the Dead Sea was expensive because it was heavily taxed, but after it had lost its savour, his mother had no recourse but to throw it out onto the street. Later he would tell his disciples that when spicy influence is lost, like salt, "it is fit for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under foot of men."<sup>28</sup> He would notice his mother working the leaven into the bread, and later watch the meal rise in the mud-brick oven. In the years to come he would remember this as an illustration of human behavior: just a little bit can stir up quite a bit of commotion in the crowds.

Illustrations from life abound:

With six or seven children growing up Mary must have wondered if it was not worth while to patch old garments; of course, the patch might come away, leaving the rent worse. He was not to have a like wonder about his teaching; while John the Baptist's teaching was a patch on the old religion of the scribes and Pharisees, his Gospel was a whole new garment. Or, as he was to see it in another picture, it was not like new wine put into old leather bottles, wine that still fermenting caused the shrunk bottles to burst. Perhaps he remembered hearing in his Nazareth home a bottle bursting with a bang.<sup>29</sup>

The argument could be made that Jesus follows a long line of Rabbinic teachers who used story and parable to explain truth found in

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<sup>28</sup>Mathew 5:13

<sup>29</sup>Andrew Young, The Poetic Jesus (New York: Harper & Row 1972), pp. 3,4.

Scripture. This would be incorrect.<sup>30</sup> The rabbis used stories as didactic metaphors, those of Jesus are poetic metaphors. The parables of Jesus are

...subservient only to the experienced revelation which seeks to articulate its presence in, by, and through them. It is neither necessary nor advisable to turn difference into hierarchical distinction. The teacher and the poet go different ways and each is good, bad, or mediocre in his own distinct fashion. If one still wishes to insist that Jesus was a teacher this can certainly be admitted, but he taught as a poet!<sup>31</sup>

2. The CHRISTIAN dimension suggests that for the Church to affirm Jesus as the Christ of God is to speak in theopoetic terms

Like any great event, we can only grasp its significance in retrospection. Only through thoughtful hindsight can we know the full implications of a significant happening which has befallen us. So it is with the Christ Event. The first all-encompassing statement about that Event was perhaps Paul's assertion that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." (II Cor. 5:19) But there were other more theopoetic statements, which illuminate a different meaning of

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<sup>30</sup>G. Bornkamm, Jesus of Nazareth (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 69: "The rabbis also relate parables in abundance, to clarify a point in their teachings and an instrument in the exegesis of an authoritatively prescribed text. But that is just what they are not in the mouth of Jesus, although they often come very close to those of the Jewish teachers in their content, and though Jesus makes free use of traditional and familiar topics. Here the parables are the preaching itself and are not merely serving the purpose of a lesson which is quite independent of them."

<sup>31</sup>John Dominic Crossan, "Parable as Religious and Poetic Experience." Journal of Religion, (53:3, July 1973), 349.

the divine-human encounter which had taken place. Some said simply "Jesus is Lord," others were more cosmic in scope:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was  
with God, and the Word was God...  
And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.  
John 1: 1, 14.

The point is that the early church if it could speak of God's activity in Jesus of Nazareth had to resort to poetic imagery. One cannot read the Bible, and especially the New Testament, without being confronted by a variety of vivid images and fanciful forms that portray some aspect of the church's understanding of what had taken place in their midst. How else can you explain the incarnation of God in a man? The church finally found a way in the Chalcedonian formula. Using the Greek concept of hypostasis ("substance") the leaders expressed the two "natures" of Jesus thus:

One and the same Christ,...recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation, the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and substance (hypostasis), not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>32</sup>

The church Fathers might be excused for using such difficult Greek concepts since they were the only cognitive tools available at the time. It is no wonder that the Chalcedonian formula is not stated in the liturgy of the church--for when you are reading it, the effect is one of confusion more than belief.

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<sup>32</sup>Henry Bettenson (ed.) Documents of the Christian Church (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), p. 73.

With the above example, it becomes obvious why the Gospel writers told such symbolic stories as the Virgin Birth and the descending dove at the baptism of Jesus to signify their belief that he was the only-begotten Son of God. Other theopoetic representations of the nature of Christ abound in John's gospel: the Bread of Life, the True Light that enlightens every man, the True Vine, the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Amos Wilder has written in some detail about this rhetorical process in his book, The Language of the Gospel. He notes how men of every culture live by images, and from these draw or invest meaning. So it was only natural that the "men who gave us the New Testament employed the world pictures and the salvation pictures of their own time to set forth their faith."<sup>33</sup> At the core of our being we are imaginative creatures. This is how we must ultimately come to grips with our world. Moreover,

Reason is implicit and diffused in...mythos and even when it orders itself as a conscious critical instrument it draws its vitality from the faith impulse associated with the myth-making faculty. If the Word of God must necessarily speak with the mythopoetic words of men, it is all the more inevitable that this should be so where the ultimate issues of existence are in question.<sup>34</sup>

3. The CHRISTIAN dimension of theopoetic expression means that the Gospel as "good news" is best expressed in images which, by their nature, carry great power to transform human consciousness.

The power of Christianity lies in its ability to change lives.

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<sup>33</sup>Amos N. Wilder, The Language of the Gospel (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 121.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

Sacked of this power, the church no longer is the "mystical body of Christ," but an institution within society involved in meaningless rituals and standing for a stodgy moralism, if even that. But how has the church displayed this power to transform human consciousness?

The answer lies in the ability of symbols to participate in the reality to which they point, and specifically in the ability of religious symbols to participate in the ultimate conditions of reality. There is a sense in which you cannot separate the subject of a poem from the poem itself. This is not to suggest that a poem or any symbol exhausts the meaning of that to which it points, but does mean that the form and the content are interconnected. T. S. Eliot was answering questions at an Oxford Poetry Club discussion in 1921, when a student asked: "Please, sir, what do you mean by the line: 'Lady, three white leopards say under a juniper tree?'" Eliot looked at him and said: "I mean, 'Lady, three white leopards say under a juniper tree.'"

<sup>34</sup> Similarly, most statements of the Christian faith may appear as senseless sentences, stumbling blocks to anyone not inside the fold of faith. But if the message can be communicated in the proper theopoetic form so that it is grasped by the mind and experienced as a self-evident truth, then it has power. This is the difference between a proper pronouncement and a poetic proclamation. The former is a truth and you can take it or leave it. The latter is a truth that is not so much a "revelation" as a "revolution" which upsets all previous notions

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<sup>34</sup> A. Tate (ed.) T. S. Eliot (New York: Dell, 1966), p. 42.

and presents itself as something you must consider on its own terms.

Christian theopoetic proclamation annihilates the false self and calls it to reckon with the true Self so magnificently manifested in Jesus Christ. As Barry Wood describes,

Jesus draws us to himself but only to point us back at ourselves. His greatness is our greatness, for he shows us what we might be. Thus the "incarnating" Word we see in him must be found in ourselves, so that we can exclaim with Paul, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."<sup>35</sup>

More about this process in the next chapter.

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<sup>35</sup> Barry Wood, The Magnificent Frolic (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), p. 135.



## Chapter 3

### ANOTHER LOOK AT MYTH, MIND AND MYSTICISM

There are many ways to look at life. It could be viewed as a swirl of unconnected events strung together by circumstance--or it can be seen as a beautifully woven pattern. Life can be called a cruel hoax, victimizing the one who chooses to go on living--others call it a great adventure, filled with golden opportunities and unexpected rewards. There are countless symbols used to depict the purpose of it all: life is a question mark or an exclamation point; a good waltz or a chaotic frenzy; it tastes like good wine or bitter herbs. Whatever life is, as with any drama, an actor who will play his part well must of first importance catch a vision of the play.

This "vision of the play" is what a myth seeks to provide. By telling a story, myth gives coherence, unity, and meaning to confusion. Drawing upon the archetypal images shared by humanity and weaving them into a common theme, a myth answers some of the tenuous questions of existence as it echoes of truth in the human mind. So important is myth to the ordering of life, even to rational, scientific man, that we must include it as an indispensable part of modern theopoetic expression.

The second part of this chapter is a discussion of how the mind as myth-maker intuitively finds meaning in the process of symbolization. For this study the work of Dr. C. G. Jung is primary. His pioneering work

into the deeper reaches of the psyche has brought respectability to the investigations now under way into man's intuitional side. We shall examine others who are providing insight into a growing field of academic research: Noetics--the science of consciousness. The fruit of this inquiry will be to show that we can begin to see the human mind as a kind of Theopoet.

The final section will take a fresh look at mysticism and how it relates to a Christian theopoetic. Mysticism has been called the foundation of all vital religions. While mystics have flowered in certain periods of history more than others, there has never been an age of renewed religious fervor that was not directly related to an increased trust in inner spiritual awareness. Indeed, many have suggested that the spiritual style of the next quarter-century, which we see unfolding now, will include a resurgence of interest in the inward search and the creative powers waiting there to be tapped by the modern mystic. Inspiration is a theopoetic reality known to artist and mystic alike.

#### THE REDISCOVERY OF MYTH

If you go to a library and look at the volumes catalogued under "myth," it does not take long to recognize that, with few exceptions, each book is a study in the primitive stories, rituals, and totems of ancient peoples. The misleading implication is that myth-making and myth-living are practices known only to those bipeds who eked out their existence before the dawn of civilization.

What modern man must realize is that mythologies were not peculiar only to the Greeks of old or to wandering nomads of bygone eras; they are common to all humanity. Man is a myth-making creature for that is how he makes sense of his existence. In popular thinking, myth and science exclude each other, but on closer examination they are quite similar. Freud regarded the mythological view of the world as nothing more than the psychological processes projected into the world, something that even scholars and scientists cannot refrain from doing. In a letter to Albert Einstein, he wrote:

It may perhaps seem to you as though our theories are a kind of mythology...But does not every science come in the end to a kind of mythology like this? Cannot the same be said today of your own Physics?<sup>1</sup>

Ernst Cassirer, a student of mathematical physics, writes that science begins with mythic perception; he shows that the origins of science, as with art, language, and philosophy, lead us inevitably back to the stage when they were rooted in mythical images and expressions.<sup>2</sup> Such men as Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton felt the laws they discovered were metaphors and symbols as necessary to science as to poetry. Who can argue against the fact that much of modern science deals in fictions, or at best, in symbolic concepts such as zero and infinity, square roots of negative numbers, fourth dimensions and the like? There are not a few writers who see the white robed scientist as

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<sup>1</sup>Sigmund Freud, Collected Papers (London: Hogarth Press, p. 283.

<sup>2</sup>Ernst Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953-57)

the high priest of our technological culture, the great myth-maker of these times.

Myths provide meaning and structure for our existence. It's as if we're in a free fall from birth to death and we seek some way to give a purpose to the journey. Anyone who has ever watched sky-divers at work knows that there are lots of things to do in free fall: take pictures, eat an apple, or hold hands with a falling companion. But he can also speculate on the significance of the journey, upon how he got where he is, and what might happen when he hits the ground. The making of a myth is just this same kind of speculation carried out in the form of symbolization.

We all seek to make sense out of the journey from birth to death, and we will borrow any and all meaningful myths already constructed that will calm our fears and give direction along the way. Modern man must not think less of his prairie predecessors who maintained a mystical bond with nature, who cared for their ponies and envied the freedom of a skylark's flight. The mystical bond is broken, to be sure, but we still ride our Pintos to the airport so that we can fly "the wings of man." We can now do some of the things our ancestors only dreamed of, but somehow the myth is degraded into a feeble idolatry.

Our entire commercial economy depends on this need of men and women to structure their lives around an appealing myth. Television is saturated with such examples. Men's clothing is not sold so much as is the opportunity to become Adonis. Feminine undergarments offer women the allure of being goddesses in their own time, or anything at all for

that matter (remember "I dreamed I was a \_\_\_\_\_ in my Maidenform Bra"?). Automobiles sell sexual prowess and the possibility of taking on the characteristics of wild animals (Cougar, Cobra, Pinto, and Barracuda are examples). There are other myths--sometimes subtle, sometimes not--propounded over the airwaves. There's the myth of a perpetually operating machine that will never need servicing ("Maytag repairmen are the loneliest people in town"); the sexual fantasy connected with the ecstasy of flight ("Hi, I'm Barbara--FLY ME!"); and the genre of advertisements that imply you receive the aid of a "white tornado" or a genie to help you with the housework in every bottle of cleanser (like the burly man who comes right out of the wall offering his assistance with the words, "Hi, I'm Big Wally!"). With all of these examples, who's to say that erudite, twentieth century man is not every bit as superstitious, mythological, and given to magic as primitive cultures?

Not all myths are of the same magnitude. The fragmentary ones described above are of a relatively small nature, while there are much larger myths that command the enthusiasm of great numbers of people. An example of the latter would be the utopian myth that surrounded Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler. And of course, there are fairy tales and fables, the literary myths from Faustus to Moby Dick that provide us with poetic handles with which to grasp the meaning of existence. The important thing to keep in mind is that myths speak to the human consciousness with force and power because a human being is an animal

symbolicum,<sup>3</sup> and he must use symbols and images to catch a "vision of the play." How this is done is the topic of the next section.

It is important as we center down in this study of myth in theopoetic expression, to look at the three stages of myth. Richard E. Moore, in his book Myth America 2001,<sup>4</sup> has suggested a satisfactory typology. Stage one is called the Compelling Myth. Here, a concept is conversational and its adherents are like what Eric Hoffer has described as "true believers."<sup>5</sup> People are dissatisfied with answers provided by the current milieu and find a new Answer to their search in the Truth embodied in this new way of ordering experience.

The Compelling Myth is a winner only in retrospect. There is nothing inevitable about its success at the outset. What is inevitable is the climate in which it grows, and because the process involves feedback, the climate to which it contributes is also inevitable: a time of chaos, confusion, and doubt.<sup>6</sup>

The second stage is the Subliminal Myth. When a Compelling Myth is ascendant, it ties together all the loose ends and harmonizes all the contradictions in a comprehensive perspective. This myth becomes the established order and it is taken for granted. Culture and the myth become synonymous. What was once filled with the power to convert is now no longer dynamic. What was compelling is now

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<sup>3</sup>Ernst Cassirer, An Essay on Man (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup>Richard E. Moore, Myth America 2001 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), pp. 26-46.

<sup>5</sup>Eric Hoffer, The True Believer (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951).

<sup>6</sup>Moore, p. 27.

subliminal as the status quo. In the subliminal phase, persons who challenge the pervading myth are considered fools, for they challenge what everyone else knows to be the orthodox assumption.

Stage three is the Rationalized Myth. Moore describes this third change in the following way:

When it becomes necessary to reinterpret the myth, to snip and cut and fit the old myth to new ones which are in the ascendancy, a new period or phase has begun. Bultmann calls this "demythologizing" when he reshapes the Christian myth to his own existential patterns. A more adequate way to describe his activity is this: Bultmann really is accommodating the Christian myth to a world view more compatible with the canons of science and technology.<sup>7</sup>

Thus it is possible for certain myths or symbolic media of truth, which once held magnetic attraction to the human consciousness, later to push into the recesses of the cultural mind-set, and ultimately to lose their power altogether unless adapted in some way into the new Compelling Myth. Even so, there is no set pattern or time-table for these changes.

The time span from stage to stage and from myth to myth may vary by a millenium. Some myths never leave the kindergarten stage or win more than a handful of adherents; other myths pass directly from stage one to stage three, never capturing the cultural rewards of the second and socially dominant phase.<sup>8</sup>

In a previous discussion (pp.16 and 17), it was noted how some of the traditional symbols of the Christian faith are riding piggyback on commercially popularized slogans. Such illustrations give credence to the notion that certain mythic representations of the Gospel have lost their power and are now becoming rationalized. The question then

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 36, 37.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 25, 26.

becomes: If God is known, in a theopoetic sense, through the symbols of culture, what happens when these symbols no longer carry the meaning they once did? The answer is that we must not fear their demise but see God expressing Himself in newer, more compelling modes of symbolization. This implies also, that we must be courageous enough to leave some traditionally cherished (subliminal?) symbols behind if we are to focus on whatever fresh ones are breaking in with power.

Probably because of increased communication opportunities, much of modern theological writing has speeded up this movement from one way of expressing God to another--and then on to still another. As Royal F. Shepard, Jr. reminds us,<sup>9</sup> much of theology has sought to describe God with nouns and verbs, but in this age of "linguistic puzzlement," it has been the lowly preposition which has determined the nature of God:

When the God of deism moves too far outside for comfort, the romantic within settles him down in every front room until all our illusions are shattered by the thundering over against of the neo-reformation reaction. A less grating option appears in the between of the I and Thou people, while others speak of a depth dimension which grounds us all in something underneath. As time goes on the secular theologies emerge, sometimes hailing the divine presence in the world and other times suggesting that God is so far out of it as hardly to be anywhere at all. Further embellishments appear with Cox's God alongside<sup>10</sup> and Baum's inside God<sup>11</sup> before whom one

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<sup>9</sup>Royal F. Shepard, Jr., "Within, Between, and Beyond: An Exploration Along the Boundaries of Theology and Spirituality," Religion in Life, XLI:3 (Autumn 1972), pp. 317-326.

<sup>10</sup>Harvey Cox, The Secular City (New York: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 230, 231.

<sup>11</sup>Gregory Baum, Man Becoming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 170.



is never simply "over against"...Finally a spate of forward-looking theologies of diverse origins prompts the conjecture that the best preposition to apply to God these days is the word ahead.<sup>12</sup>

And so it is that God can be known variously as Process, Transcending Spirit, Revolutionary, Dialogical Presence, Co-creator, or even as the Call Forward. Christology is revised in much the same way. How God is acting in Christ has been developed by a plethora of myths describing Jesus as Physician, Clown, Disturber, Mystic Teacher and Lord of the Dance. God remains in principle omnipresent, and Christ eternal, but the mythic terminology must change from time to time to fulfill the psychic needs of humanity. When the symbol that once carried the meaning of God becomes subliminally closeted into the backrooms of consciousness, a new and more compelling symbol must arise. When a sacred story about Christ has descended into a rationalized conceptualization and no longer speaks to the yearnings of the human spirit, the atmosphere is right for some new mode of mythic imagery to germinate into life. The theopoetic concern is both to discover the locus of God's presence in the world and to find the appropriate expression whereby the Word might be appropriated redemptively in the human mind.

#### THE MIND AS THEOPOET

In this section, I want to sketch briefly my argument for seeing the mind as a kind of Theopoet which ultimately seeks to know God in its own terms. To begin, however, I shall recall a few of the

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<sup>12</sup>Shepard, p. 317

salient features from the previous discussion. The first is that myth-making and myth-living are not primitive, but primary functions of human consciousness. We all seek some ordering structure, no matter how absurd at times, by which we can catch a "vision of the play."

The second point made is that we do this because man is a symbolic animal and myths tell the story better and more powerfully than any other means of communication.

Third and finally, myths tend to move according to stages of effectiveness. That is, a Compelling Myth soon loses its power to convert when it becomes ingrained in a society's self-understanding. As such, it has become a Subliminal Myth. Rationalized Myth is the third stage when what was once a dynamic Idea becomes adapted and merged into the more current ways of ordering reality.

This whole process of ordering and re-ordering Reality according to myths is inherently a psychic function because it involves symbols. A myth of the first order is a symbol because it is experienced as the point of contact with an illimitable reality. According to the theories of Carl Jung, as explained by Ira Progoff, a symbol

...opens up beyond itself, touching in the form of a representation something that the understanding does not fully encompass, but into which it wishes to reach. The symbol, taken in this sense, therefore, cannot be a means of communication, since it does not refer to any specifically known thing. It is a direct, continuing experience of something real, which is yet indefinable for Man, and is itself in need of signs in order that its presence may be communicated.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Ira Progoff, Jung's Psychology and Its Social Meaning (Garden City: Doubleday, 1973), p. 161.

A myth and symbol are the appropriate modes of expressing God as a Reality which can never be fully encompassed, but into which it reaches. This theopoetic expression, as I have called it, provides a "direct, continuing experience of something real, which is yet indefinable in Man."

As Jung defines it, the symbol does not come from the world of outer experience. Although it is expressed in society, its origin is not a social but a psychic phenomenon. Symbols emerge out of the autonomous processes of symbol formation in the psyche. Coming from the depths of the unconscious as intuitive representations, they are "autonomous glimpses into phases of reality that are not otherwise known."<sup>14</sup> When this happens in such a way that the individual is truly affected, the symbol becomes a kind of "living thing" to him. It "speaks" to him of meaning and illuminates something of the world around him. Should the symbol lose this quality of "aliveness" and cease to provide inspiration, it becomes "dead" and "it possesses only historical significance."<sup>15</sup> The important thing to remember is that it is not within the power of the individual--nor of society for that matter--to make a symbol or a myth happen or even come alive again once it has died. No amount of intellectual creativity can produce a living symbol and no amount of rationalization can resuscitate a dead one.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>15</sup>Carl Jung, Psychological Types (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1923), p. 602.

If God is made known to us powerfully through symbols (and that is my thesis), then we must begin to see the mind as a kind of Theopoet wherein symbols and myths are spontaneously formed out of the depth of the unconscious. Images of God come to us "where deep calls to deep" and impinge upon our consciousness not from outer experience, but from inner. This process happens in much the same way as a dream comes to us: like a kind of inner dialogue with Purpose. As one writer has illustrated it:

Me: "There is something wrong with my life and I don't understand what it is."

Dream: "Look, I'll draw you a picture."<sup>16</sup>

Myths can be seen, then as "public dreams" and dreams as "private myths."<sup>17</sup> In picture language they keep us in touch with that which integrates our lives. Through these inner symbolic forms, God is intuited. I suggest that the Theopoet of the mind apprehends God in this way, for the meaning of God is received with poetic efficacy. This is not so much to venture out on a theoretical limb as it is to indicate something which modern psychological research supports: that at least half of the human brain functions in an intuitive mode of

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<sup>16</sup>Hugh Prather, I Touch the Earth, the Earth Touches Me (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), p. 73.

<sup>17</sup>Joseph Campbell, Myths to Live By (New York: Viking Press, 1972), p. 12.

perception.<sup>18</sup>

The late and beloved Roman Catholic monk Thomas Merton wrote a brief but interesting article entitled "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?" In it, he writes of how the mind is grasped by the religious symbol and drawn into the presence of the Divine.

The true symbol...contains in itself a structure which awakens our consciousness to a new awareness of the inner meaning of life and of reality itself. A true symbol takes us to the center of the circle, not to another point on the circumference. It is by symbolism that man enters effectively and consciously into contact with his own deepest self, with other man, and with God.<sup>20</sup>

"God is dead"...means, in fact, that symbols are dead.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>The most recent work done in this area is compiled in Robert E. Ornstein, The Psychology of Consciousness (New York: Viking Press, 1972). In the chapter entitled "The Two Sides of the Brain," (pp. 50-73), Ornstein writes of research which has concluded that the brain is actually two "half brains." That is while sharing the potential for many functions, each hemisphere tends to specialize. The left hemisphere is involved with "analytic, logical thinking, especially in verbal and mathematical functions." (p. 51) This half processes information sequentially.

The right hemisphere is more holistic. It is "primarily responsible for our orientation in space, artistic endeavor, crafts, body image, recognition of faces." (p. 52) While this right side is the major mode of consciousness for the mystic disciplines, crafts and music, a polarity and integration of both right and left modes of consciousness are necessary for complete human functioning. This does serve to suggest, however, that the one part of the mind given to thinking about God might be called the Theopoet, while the other half of the brain, given the same task, might be called the Logician. Might we not also speculate that the Theopoet is another word for soul? Indeed, it is the conclusion of some theologians that the locus of the soul is the brain. See John B. Cobb, Jr., A Christian Natural Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), pp. 82-91.

<sup>19</sup>Thomas Merton, "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?" in New Directions 20 (New York: New Directions, 1968), pp. 11, 12.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 11, 12.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 1, 2.

Let us follow this thought by looking at the changes undergone in man's conceptualization of God. There was a time when the meaning of human life was solely understood as service to the glory of God. Honoring the Creator as the chief aim of man was not just a precept of the Church, but a psychological impulse in a time when the symbols of the God-archetype held sway over the human psyche. Because of the power that these symbols possessed, God was felt as intimately related to man. As the vitality of the symbol of God declined, and as the experience of God was replaced by belief in God, the divine image died in western civilization and the image of man moved to the center stage of consciousness. The humanistic view emerged and the religious view waxed. The Christian symbolism that called man to look to the heavens as the source of his redemption and the end of his fulfillment was replaced by the downward gaze of man to the "real" material world. In the age of scholasticism, the search for Truth became preeminent. The God-archetype and Truth became almost synonymous, and for many, remains so today.

With all the modern interest in materiality, in the concern for the world's resources, in achieving great mechanical feats of engineering and in the increased productivity of goods and services, we have seen a tremendous inflation of the human ego and the worship of man's physical and intellectual capacities. At the same time has come a diminution of the traditional image of God in western civilization. But the human psyche still perceives the God-archetype ever anew in fresh symbols that arise to the front of the contemporary scene. There

is an ancient affirmation which reads, "God is an intelligible sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere." If this be so, then each of us is the center, and within each person is the mind as Theopoet which illustrates the Reality it participates in and expresses through myths, dreams and symbols. The Theopoet, using the primordial images and archetypes known to men of all time, creates the inspiriting vision, the great poems of Presence. And while with limited perspective it may seem that the religious Vision is in eclipse, the inner impulses of inspiration cannot be quieted, and it is never long before some new spiritual Phoenix is born out of the ashes of the old. As the lines from the famous poem remind us:

For each age is a dream that is dying,  
Or one that is coming to birth.<sup>22</sup>

#### MYSTICAL CHRISTIANITY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

"Moreover, something is or seems  
That touches me with mystic gleams,  
Like glimpses of forgotten dreams--

"Of something felt, like something here;  
Of something done, I know not where;  
Such as no language may declare."

--The Two Voices  
Tennyson

Since my thesis is that God becomes a reality to us in symbols of his presence, and since the process of symbolization is a psychic one, it is important to include a section which deals specifically with

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<sup>22</sup>William Edward O'Shaughnessy's poem "Ode," quoted from stanza 3.

religion as an inner experience; hence we shall now turn our attention to mysticism.

The previous section concluded by discussing the decline in impact of the traditional image of God. In the long run, however, the death of the image of God in the western psyche may just turn out to be the greatest spiritual breakthrough to happen in centuries. The spiritual dilemma of modern times just might be resolved by finding affirmative significance in the death of God, for it

opens the possibility of a new relationship to God based eventually on a richer understanding of what God means. Here there comes to us the hope of a renaissance for God considering that in time God will be born again within the western psyche. The implications of this reach far...but its most significant characteristic will be found in the fact that it will bring a complete reversal in the traditional western orientation toward the religious life.<sup>23</sup>

As the extroverted symbols (reality that is seen as "out there" somewhere) lose their strength, and allegiance to them no longer seems viable, then men and women will be recalled to themselves, forced to find a way to experience reality within the depths of the soul. The psychic vacuum left by the death of God will no doubt draw increasing numbers of people into the deep center of themselves "where God can be reborn for them beyond the symbolisms which have been worn thin by history."<sup>24</sup>

This inner quest is what mysticism is all about. As one writer has suggested, mysticism

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<sup>23</sup>Progoff, p. 279.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 280.



strives to piece together the fragments broken by the religious cataclysm, to bring back the old unity which religion had destroyed but on a new plane where the world of mythology and that of revelation meet in the soul of man.<sup>25</sup>

The soul of man is the creative Theopoet. It is there new dreams arise and the "still small voice" is heard. For a long time we have not listened to this voice and the dry bones of dogma testify to the fact.

But like any cycle, any rhythm of change, it was inevitable that we return to that which we had forsaken. Our time cries out for the nurture that comes from tapping the inner resources. What we see now in our culture is similar to the tree that sheds its leaves in autumn. The leaves were beautiful and useful, but now they are dried and fallen. Others will take their place in the spring, but first the tree must renew itself. We must not paste dead leaves on the bare twigs or say that the tree is useless and must be cut down. The value of a tree in winter is not in its leaves or blossoms, but in its function as a silent laboratory, receiving strength and vitality from its roots.

For Christianity to be true to its theopoetic calling, the faithful must not be enslaved to the monarchical conceptualization of God as an enthroned Judge in heaven, and Christ as a onetime Visitor, for such images no longer speak to the religious impulses of modern men and women. The present mood is already one of distance--of a chasm that separates Creator from creative--and the human longing is to realize the oneness of which the Incarnation is the symbol. As

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<sup>25</sup>Gershom G. Scholem (ed.) Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (New York: Schocken, 1955)

Allan Watts has observed,

the Church has rendered the Gospel ineffective by setting Jesus on a pedestal of excessive reverence and making him so unique that he is virtually isolated from the human condition. By setting itself apart from the world-wide traditions of mystical religion Christianity appears, not as unique, but as an anomalous oddity with imperious claims.<sup>26</sup>

Though it has not generally been displayed in the churches, there is a genuine religious zeal being manifested in contemporary society. The "new religious" and interest in the occult give witness to the fact that many people want religious experience--not doctrines and belief systems--RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE. Twentieth century man no longer wants to be told about God, he wants to know God for himself. He wants his own life to be joined and made one forever with the meaning of all things, to have some conscious awareness of being at one with Reality itself, so that his otherwise insignificant and ephemeral life can take on eternal worth.

Consequently, searching persons will travel to an ashram in the east or to a visiting yogi in the west; they will join every kind of pseudo-mystical cult from Transcendental Meditation to Theosophy.

They do not and cannot be expected to know that the Church has in its possession, under lock and key (or maybe the sheer weight of persons sitting on the lid), the purest gold of mystical religion. Still less do they know that creed and sacrament are only fully intelligible in terms of the mystical life.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Alan Watts, Behold the Spirit (New York: Random House, 1947), p. xvii.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

In the words of Jung, "the creative mystic was ever a cross for the Church, but it is to him that we owe whatever is best in humanity."

<sup>28</sup> It is to the mystic that we turn for guidance through the valley of the shadow of the death of God. He has walked that path before illumined by the same inner light that is a part of every human spirit.

God has indeed made an inconceivably sublime and mysterious contradictory image of himself, without the help of man, and implanted it in man's unconscious as an archetype, the archetypal light: not in order that theologians of all times and places should be at one another's throats, but in order that the unpretentious man might glimpse an image, in the stillness of his soul, that is akin to him and is wrought of his own psychic substance. This image contains everything which he will ever imagine concerning his gods or concerning the ground of his psyche.<sup>29</sup>

What kind of meditation would be appropriate for such a theopoetic mysticism? In the book On the Psychology of Meditation, Claudio Naranjo categorizes meditation into three major types.<sup>30</sup> They are:

- A. The Way of Forms: concentration, absorption, union, outer-directed.
- B. The Expressive Way: freedom, transparency, surrender, inner-directed.
- C. The Negative Way: elimination detachment, emptiness, centered.

The Way of Forms begins with an object of contemplation--poems, musical works, paintings, a Christian litany, the symbol of the cross, or a rose. These contain power because they are grounded in a certain

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<sup>28</sup>Jung, Psychological Reflections (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 340.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 52

<sup>30</sup>Claudio Naranjo and Robert E. Ornstein, On the Psychology of Meditation (New York: Viking Press, 1971), pp. 6-18.

virtue of beingness. The Expressive Way is non-directive in that it lets the person be guided by the promptings of his own deepest nature. The third type is the Negative Way. Here the meditator moves away from all objects or what may be the irrelevant within himself until he is so dis-identified from his self-concept that he touches the ground of the true Self.

While this last form of meditation is a valid approach to the mystical experience (St. John of the Cross is one Christian who used the path of negation), it would seem that the first two are more suitable to theopoetic experience. As one contemplates a symbol, or is confronted by a powerful image as in a theophany, he perceives the Other as it is reflected in his own center in relation to his receptivity. In the Expressive Way, the meditator seeks to be receptive and open to himself as he becomes a channel for God's expression.

The interesting thing about these two modes of meditation is that

They converge upon a common end state, for, after all, the forms and symbols that the traditions of mankind offer as starting points for meditation have originated in spontaneity. And, conversely, a surrender to spontaneity leads not to chaos but to the expression of a definite structure that all men share. As Jung showed in the domain of visual fantasy, the images become more "collective"--and therefore similar to the universal patterns of myth--the more the subject explores his presumably individual depth.<sup>31</sup>

No matter what the form the end result is the awareness that we "escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion,

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

and become partakers of the divine nature." (II Peter 1:4)<sup>32</sup> Express-  
ed poetically it is the theopoetic realization that

I am  
a particular manifestation  
of the Creator's  
creativity.

God  
has imaged Himself,  
and continuously  
images Himself,  
in me.

I am created  
and creat-ive  
out of His  
creativity.

God  
expresses Himself  
in me  
and through me,  
as well as  
in and through  
the world.

The affirmation becomes specifically Christian when there is included  
the following:

Christ  
is my  
true Self

Christ  
is  
my point of contact with  
God's creative Self-expression.

It is  
not I who live  
but  
Christ lives  
in me.

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<sup>32</sup>II Peter 1:4.

God's action  
in Christ  
is  
God's action  
in me.

## Chapter 4

### THE CHURCH'S THEOPOETIC DISCIPLINE

In the first two chapters, the dialectic of sacred and profane was discussed. According to Mircea Eliade, the two appear to be in direct opposition to each other. When the sacred becomes known, it is perceived as something totally different from the profane. But the difference is one of "perception" rather than reality, for the sacred shows itself in the midst of the profane; that which we term religious is discovered in the secular. The two actually are one in the same reality. Eliade explains this by saying that

...the sacred is equivalent to a power, and in the last analysis, is reality. The sacred is saturated with being. Sacred power means reality and at the same time enduringness and efficacy...Thus it is easy to understand the religious man deeply desires to be, to participate in reality, to be saturated with power.<sup>1</sup>

As I have tried to show (with the help of Bellah and Lifton), the religious desires of modern man are becoming increasingly frustrated. For our contemporaries, the break between the sacred and the profane seems hopelessly wide and the chasm of meaninglessness appears to be ever so deep and dark and empty. The age of miracles is behind us--or so it seems, and the world is supposed to go on its way until the sun cools off and the earth bellows its last cosmic grasp of dying breath. But it has also been my intent to point out that this

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<sup>1</sup>Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1959), pp. 12, 13.

"religious" crisis is merely a crisis of symbolization. The numinous still breaks in and manifests itself in the hierophanies of divine intervention. The real religious quest is for appropriate new modes of perceiving God's reality and then finding symbols through which the sacred presence can be experientially communicated. This is the task of theopoetics.

There are many who share this theopoetic vision. They are persons who have known the mystical Presence. For them God is not a being up there or out there who acted once in history two thousand years ago, however decisive that was. They will not accept this "rear-view mirror" religious sentimentality. God is not spoken of by them in terms of the past-tense but the present-indicative. These common people--writers, poets, artists and theologians--seek to remain in touch with the great mystical traditions of the Christian community with their insistence on the intimacy of God's presence to his creatures. Ordinary, life is seen as the locus of divine activity. What some may call the "secular," can just as easily be called the field of the sacred. As Donald Gray so eloquently expresses:

God is beyond in the midst, the insider God, the depth dimension of all experience. Human life is what it is precisely because this God is actively present in it at every point. God is, therefore, recognized as the creative and redemptive mystery within the process of humanization itself, immanently present and active in all of life and in the lives of all men. This God not only created in the past; he continues to create today. His redemptive activity did not begin only in the middle of human history, it is in fact coterminous with the whole of human, and indeed evolutionary history. Nor will he consummate his work only at some time in future, for even today he is about the work of sanctifying and fulfilling his creatures--the end is already in the process of



being realized in the present experience of judgment and salvation.<sup>2</sup>

The above statement of faith is written in the rhetoric of discursive longhand. But virtually the same affirmation was written in compact theopoetic style by an early Christian writer, who, in describing Christ as God's self-manifestation, recites the following two stanzas:

He is the image of the invisible God  
the first-born of all creation;  
for in him all things were created.  
He is before all things,  
and in him all things hold together.

He is the head of the body,  
he is the beginning,  
the first-born from the dead,  
that in everything he might be pre-eminent,  
that in him all things might be reconstituted  
in heaven and earth.<sup>3</sup>

Such was the faith of the early church. And it is here that we must turn to the church's psychotheological ministry. For if the above cosmic view of God's incarnation is true, and I have tried to show its truth in the dimensions of a Christian theopoetic, then we must re-affirm that God reveals his presence in existence in the only meaningful way--on the level of human consciousness.

Incarnation is a special act with the specific purpose of bringing man's inner consciousness in touch with God. In psychotheological terms this is accomplished by giving man the opportunity to confront God himself...The Christ whom God revealed had always been working in creation and in the human heart. But for

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<sup>2</sup>Donald Gray, "Sacramental Consciousness-Raising," Worship, (46:3, March 1972), p. 131.

<sup>3</sup>Colosians 1: 15-20.

man, Christ's incarnation became Incarnation, revealing the possibility of new levels of divine activity in his conscious relations with life around him...If revelare means "to take away the veil" from God's face, it means taking it away from man's heart as well.<sup>4</sup>

So it is that the church, which knows itself as the "mystical body of Christ" affirms in its experience the incarnational aspect of God's self-disclosure. How the church carries out such an awareness is the focus of this chapter and the next. With regard to the church's psychotheological ministry, we shall examine first her theopoetic discipline and then her theopoetic witness. These are the intramural and extramural aspects of the Gospel proclamation. Many years ago, Jaroslav Pelikan sought to capture the essential meaning of catholic Christianity in the formula: identity plus universality.

By identity I mean that which distinguishes the church from the world--its message, its uniqueness, its particularity. By universality, on the other hand, I mean that which impels the church to embrace nothing less than all mankind in its vision and its appeal.<sup>5</sup>

What Pelikan means by identity and universality is not at all dissimilar to my use of the terms discipline and witness.

The concern of this chapter shall be the divine redemptive mystery present in all of life and in the lives of all, but which the Christian church realized to be its conscious awareness which is experienced and celebrated in the disciplines of prayer and healing, teaching and liturgy. In the last chapter, the focus will shift to the

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<sup>4</sup>E. Mark Stern and Bert G. Marino, Psychotheology (New York: Newman Press, 1970), pp. 39, 40.

<sup>5</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, The Riddle of Roman Catholicism (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1959), pp. 21, 22.

church's psychotheological ministry to the world at large. My aim there will be to outline the church's theopoetic witness through preaching, counseling, social action and evangelism.

#### THE MINISTER AS SHAMAN

In his book Modern Man in Search of a Soul, Carl Gustaf Jung discusses the spiritual problems of people in the twentieth century. "Modern man," he writes, "has lost all the metaphysical certainties of his medieval brother, and set up in their place the ideals of material security, general welfare and humaneness."<sup>6</sup> But this is never fully satisfying, and recent interest in the many schools of psychology seem to indicate an earnest desire to turn away from materiality and re-discover the meaning of this own subjective processes. And when he turns to the churches, he finds that the various forms of religion no longer appear to be coming from within, from the depths of the spirit he knows is a part of his own psychic world. And so "he tries on a number of religions and convictions as if they were Sunday attire, only to lay them aside again like worn-out clothes."<sup>7</sup>

But Jung points out that the field of psychology has been no more a harbor of rest for the spiritually frustrated individual than some religions. So much of psychology has been just like other sciences--chemistry, physics and biology--in looking for pathological

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<sup>6</sup>Carl Jung, Modern Man in Search of a Soul (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1933), p. 204.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 206.

causes for problems of the soul. It has tended to look at human neuroses so as to become a psychology without the "psyche."<sup>8</sup> Jung argues that our present experience of neuroses ought to be understood as influenced not from the side of their irreducible elements, the glandular secretions or brain cell malfunctions, but from psychic activity arising out of the depths of the unconscious.

In the chapter called "Psychotherapists or Clergymen?", Jung posits that "a psycho-neurosis must be seen as the suffering of a human being who has not discovered what life means for him."<sup>9</sup> The psychiatrist who sees this situation knows that he is in an area which he will approach with the greatest hesitation. Doctors are not trained to dispense answers to life's meaning, they are to work for physical or mental healing.

But what will he do when he sees only too clearly why his patient is ill; when he sees that it arises out of his having no love, but only sexuality; no faith, because he is afraid to grope in the dark; no hope, because he is disillusioned by the world and by life; and no understanding, because he has failed to read the meaning of his own experience?<sup>10</sup>

And too often it is of little use to send people with such problems to the clergyman for help. Many educated individuals resent the clergyman's propensity for spurning out dogmatic statements about the religious meaning of existence. Too often the spiritual answers given are over-simplified and betray a rigid parochial bias which leaves people cold.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp. 225, 226.

A person needs, Jung says, four things in order to really live: faith, hope, love and insight.<sup>11</sup> Is this anything different from what a minister might say? Possibly not, if the minister would agree that these are gifts of grace which are neither to be taught nor learned, given nor taken, neither withheld nor earned, since they come through experience. Experience is something that happens to us "and therefore beyond the reach of human caprice."<sup>12</sup> So the doctor and pastor are inadequate separately. Meaningful events cannot be prescribed as a sacrament cannot be prescribed or dispensed like medicine, but must happen spontaneously to truly be experienced.

The answer to this dilemma, Jung suggests, is for clergymen and psychiatrists to learn from each other in the future. Just as the psychotherapist may be ignorant of the spiritual sources of the malady, so might the clergyman be unable to deal with the painful details of an individual's psychic disturbances. For the healer to be successful, he or she must have knowledge of both the psychological and spiritual contingencies that are at work in a diseased person.

My thesis is that the Christian ministry should be a profession which is adept at both the theological and psychological implications of a person's inability to function with wholeness. Christian ministry which is modeled after Jesus the Christ must be in substance a psycho-theological ministry. Jesus knew what others have discovered: that a person's physical and mental health is influenced by spiritual powers.

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 226

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

Except where the Christian church has consented to the Gnostic's low view of the human body, ministry that has followed the example of Jesus of Nazareth in acknowledging the interrelationship of mind and body and soul. His point of view followed a whole religious way of life known as shamanism. This has been a form of ministry undertaken by a vast number of human beings from earliest times to the present. When we look at the manner with which Jesus served people in need, we see a contrast between his attitude and the official attitude of latter-day Judaism and other religions which insist upon the radical split between the Creator and his creation.

Morton Kelsey is one who has noticed the shamanistic nature of Jesus' approach to ministry:

We find that his life and acts, his teaching and practice, are rather akin to shamanism based on an intimate relationship with a loving father god...The shaman is the mediator between the individual and spiritual reality, both good and evil, and because of this the healer of diseases of mind and body. In stepping into his healing role Jesus picks up the prophetic and shamanistic strand of the Old Testament tradition...Thus Jesus brings to new focus an aspect of religious life which had been neglected in the official religions of the day.<sup>13</sup>

The primary work on this style of spiritual work is Mircea Eliade's Shamanism. In this volume, Eliade shows that all the basic elements of religion are found in shamanism. The man or woman who has entered such a calling knows the world of the spirit and interprets to others its meaning and power. Eliade writes that a shaman

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<sup>13</sup>Morton Kelsey, Healing and Christianity (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 51.

is a psychopomp, and he may also be a priest, mystic, and poet...This, of course, does not mean that he is the one and only manipulator of the sacred, nor that religious activity is completely usurped by him.<sup>14</sup>

Shamans are of the "elect" and as such they have access to a region of the sacred inaccessible to other members of the community. Their ecstatic experiences have exercised, and still exercise, a powerful influence on the stratification of religious ideology, on mythology, on ritualism...All these elements are earlier than shamanism, or at least are parallel to it, in the sense that they are the product of the general religious experience and not of a particular class of privileged beings, the ecstasies.<sup>15</sup>

There are many who would react vehemently to a comparison of Jesus with so called "pagan" shamanistic practices. Here I must repeat the proposition which began this chapter, that God is involved with his creation in the most intimate ways. Human life is what it is because of God's redemptive intimacy. Again, to quote Donald Gray:

Jesus is not atypical of what God is up to in the world; God is not out of character in his self-revelation in the ministry and fate of Jesus--he is in fact most in character, most himself... Jesus is not the beginning of God's ways as if before him God had been silent and inactive; rather he is the end of God's ways, the final sign of what God is always and everywhere up to in human history and in the history of the world of evolving nature as well.<sup>16</sup>

Is this much different than saying of Jesus "he is the image of the invisible God...?"<sup>17</sup>

While the Christian ministry has many aspects--administration, social action, ecumenical concerns, teaching, etc.--it is my plea that

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<sup>14</sup>Mircea Eliade, Shamanism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 4.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>16</sup>Gray, p. 134

<sup>17</sup>Colosians 1:15.

we rediscover the psychotheological nature of the vocation. Such a view of the profession would combine the two elements that Jung feared were becoming polarities in modern society: the psychological and the spiritual. For this we need not find a new model but simply rediscover the many parallels between shamanism and the best of classical Christian experience.

In surveying the material in this area, there seem to be four aspects of the shaman that are essential to Christian ministry. The first of these is the nature of the call. Shamans come to their vocation in ways not at all dissimilar to those by which many men and women have entered the ministry. Some have inherited the profession much like the proverbial preacher's son who takes up the mantle of his father.<sup>18</sup> Then there are those who are drawn from the ranks of men or women who have themselves been miraculously cured.<sup>19</sup> But most receive what amounts to a divine call.<sup>20</sup> There are some "self-made" shamans who have taken up the vocation without some spiritual experience, but these "are less powerful than those who inherited the profession or who obeyed the 'call' of the gods and spirits."<sup>21</sup> The ancients who followed this path usually became disillusioned and left the tribe; in our time such men may end up selling life insurance.

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<sup>18</sup>William Sachs, Black Anger ( New York: Grove Press, 1947).

<sup>19</sup>Jerome Frank, Persuasion and Healing (New York: Schocken, 1963), p. 44.

<sup>20</sup>Eliade, Shamanism, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*



Regardless of the call, the shaman receives a two-fold course of instruction: (1) ecstatic—dreams, trances, etc.; and (2) traditional—shamanistic techniques, names and function of the spirits, mythology, etc.<sup>22</sup> These two forms of learning are quite similar to a minister's own personal spiritual development and professional style. The one difference might be that the contemporary candidate's inner discipline is not stressed in pastoral training quite nearly as much as are professional techniques. Eliade writes:

Shamans are persons who stand out in their respective societies by virtue of characteristics that...represent the signs of vocation or at least of a religious crisis. They are separated from the rest of the community by the intensity of their religious experience. In other words, it would be more correct to classify shamanism among the mysticisms than with what is commonly called religion...A comparison at once comes to mind—that of monks, mystics, and saints within Christian churches.<sup>23</sup>

It would seem that the trend in recent years has been not to separate the clergy from the laity with regard to piety, lest anyone be accused of being "holier than thou." But the second mark of a shaman is his skill in recognizing spiritual needs in others. It is too often a valid indictment that the Christian ministry has lost some of the spiritual blood which should give the vocation vitality and power. Teaching has become the transference of knowledge; preaching has been the mere recital of traditional dogmas with a good story thrown in for excitement; church organization has become the manipulation of structures; pastoral counseling very seldom moves beyond the

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 8

skillful response; and worship is little more than protective ritual. This is far from the picture one gets from reading accounts of the ministry of Jesus and the apostles of the early church, and therefore quite watered down from the spiritual responsibility of the shaman described by Eliade:

This small mystical elite not only directs the community's religious life, but, as it were, guards its "soul." The shaman is the great specialist in the human soul; he alone "sees" it, for he knows its "form" and "destiny."<sup>24</sup>

Is there not a psychotheological way in which we can affirm the reality of the soul? As I stated previously, it is the soul wherein God reveals his presence in existence in the only meaningful way--on the level of human consciousness. Can we not have a ministry that specializes in discerning the health of a human soul--probing beyond the many ways people hide their inner essence--to really see its form and chart its destiny?

A third condition of the minister as shaman might well be called theopoetic consciousness. In suggesting a shamanistic approach to Christian ministry, many might assume that what I mean by the most appropriate way to serve a person in need is to dance around him three times muttering a few secret phrases, shaking a rattle and some prayer beads, and finally present him with a New Testament with the instruction to place it under a pillow or mattress wherever and whenever it hurts. This is not what I mean, although there are no doubt many

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

"Christian" hypochondriacs for whom the above cure might possibly work.

What is meant by shamanistic ministry is that the spiritual healer has the ability to perceive the reality of the personality distress and provides the proper cure to the patient. This requires a theopoetic consciousness in that he must read the mythology under which the diseased person is operating, discern the nature of ultimate reality the person responds to, and prescribe the proper cure by applying the appropriate symbol and liturgy. As Kelsey points out:

He heals by bringing beneficent powers into action against malevolent ones. He also brings knowledge of life after death, and does this through poetic and artistic means and through ritual.<sup>25</sup>

Theopoetic consciousness includes the art of spiritual discernment of myths, dreams, hierophanic events, demonic complexes and physical maladies--the kind of phenomena a shaman treats. Aside from the contribution of depth psychology, we find that myths and dreams are considered valid revelations or warning by the biblical record. Indeed, one can hardly read any section of the Bible for long without being confronted by some kind of dream, vision or audition, and even such things as trances, epiphanies, theophanies, and assorted mysterious transactions. As was discussed above in relation to myths, the actuality of the reported event is not nearly so important as its impact and meaning upon the person who reports it. Whatever the event--be it psychic, social or natural--if it troubles or delights the

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<sup>25</sup>Kelsey, Encounter With God, p. 47

beholder with a kind of ultimate concern, then a theopoetic interpretation might be called for. Because of the archetypal nature of symbols discussed before, it is possible for anything to evoke in somebody a meaning or a message that should not be ignored. God speaks to us in very incarnational modes, and how we react to them depends largely on what we bring to them. In his fascinating article, "Talking About God: Models, Ancient and Modern," Ian T. Ramsey makes the suggestion that

...the human case acts as a catalyst for the cosmic case, to generate a cosmic disclosure. The cosmic pattern chimes in with the human pattern...and their matching then evokes a cosmic disclosure around natural events such as seed time and harvest. It is as and when a cosmic disclosure is thereby evoked that we are able to speak of God--what the cosmic disclosure discloses--in terms of the models with which the finite situations have supplied us.<sup>26</sup>

Whatever kind of natural events, ranging from an experience on a mountain top to the "demonic" forces of autonomous complexes causing psychic disturbances, they are the grist of the soul and the proper concern for the "specialist of the soul." It would be well for the Christian minister to remember the admonition of I Thessalonians:

Do not stifle inspiration, and do not despise prophetic utterances, but bring them all to the test and then keep what is good in them and avoid the bad of whatever kind.<sup>27</sup>

The fourth and final aspect of shamanistic ministry is the ability to heal the whole person. To the Gnostics, the incarnation

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<sup>26</sup>Ian T. Ramsey, "Talking About God: Models, Ancient and Modern," in (ed.) Myth and Symbol, F. W. Dillistone (London: S.P.C.K., 1966), p. 81

<sup>27</sup>I Thessalonians 5:19 (NEB).

was an impossible conception. Matter and God were thought to be so exclusive of each other, that there had to have been a distant demi-god to have created the material world. Spirit, body and soul could never be seen as unified in Gnostic thought. Unfortunately, much of that same heresy pervades Christian thinking today. The nonmaterial soul and its salvation to a nonmaterial heaven has been the central theme in many circles. The body is seen as the antithesis of the soul. And the spirit, well, nobody knows what the spirit is unless it is lumped together in the same category as the soul.

Looking at the ministry of Jesus we find that he viewed the body, mind and spirit as one personality.<sup>28</sup> But Jesus differed from the Greek and Jewish thought of his day in teaching that, while individuals do have conscious control of their personalities up to a point, they could be influenced by "spiritual powers"--nonmaterial psychic realities. There were demonic forces which made people sick physically, mentally, and morally. Greek and Hebrew theories regarded the individual responsible for his decisions. Given the proper knowledge, therefore, a person would make the proper decision. Jesus throughout his ministry moved with compassion toward the people in moral, physical or mental anguish, for he knew that the reality of evil at the center of human consciousness must first of all be transformed. The controlling power of evil must be met with the liberating power of the Spirit. In

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<sup>28</sup>For a full discussion of this, see Kelsey, Healing and Christianity, pp. 52-103.

his book on Persuasion and Healing, Jerome Frank discusses shamanist techniques, and concludes,

This review of religious healing...emphasized the profound influence of emotions on health and suggests that anxiety and despair can be lethal, confidence and hope, life-giving. The modern assumptive world of Western society, which includes mind-body dualism, had had difficulty incorporating this obvious fact and has therefore tended to underemphasize it.<sup>29</sup>

This fact a minister would do well to keep in mind making pastoral visits to a hospital or shut-ins. Today we marvel at what acupuncture can do by sticking a needle or two into some remote part of the body. Why wouldn't it be just as "miraculous" to heal the body or the mind with theopoetic therapy? By meditating upon the appropriate transforming symbol of ultimate reality by means of prayer, imagery or ritual, a distressed person can find a conceptual framework for organizing his chaotic, mysterious and vague frustration and will begin to resolve inner conflicts and develop self-mastery. On that, both depth psychology and the ministries of Jesus and the early church concur. Once more to illustrate the profound sense with which the Christian church has held the unity of the personality, I close this section with an ancient benediction:

"May the God of peace himself  
sanctify you wholly;  
and may your spirit  
and soul  
and body  
be kept sound and blameless  
at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.  
He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it"

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<sup>29</sup>Frank, p. 61.

<sup>30</sup>I. Thessalonians 5:23,24.

## THEOPOETIC PRAYER AND HEALING

According to the model presented, humanity is in touch with both the space-time or material world and the world of non-space-time. The former is the secular; the latter is the sacred. The first is the concern of our sensate experience; the second is the spiritual world which comes to us in dreams and fantasies, myths and numinous images. The religious life is a testimony to the fact that the two are not countervalent, but the sacred becomes known in the profane; the profane is the ground of sacred experience. The experience of God pervades human existence.

Contemporary life has known the almost complete erosion of any sense of expectancy with regard to a divine-human encounter. As science confidently explains (or explains away) the phenomenal world, theology seems less necessary, and yet there has never been a culture which has been totally bereft of any feeling of contact with gods--of spiritual reality--whether it be through simple dreams or extraordinary experiences of the profoundest type. Oddly enough, it seems that when the numinous seems to be most in eclipse, the occult breaks through with greatest power. In a society such as ours, that suffers from a disproportionate emphasis on materiality, people search for someone to help them deal with the spiritual reality which they cannot escape. It is the shaman, the prophet and seer to whom they turn, who will affirm the validity of their experience and help them to find meaning in it. While occult sciences, zen, transcendental meditation, and psychic research have offered guidance to millions who have turned to them in

their frustration, the church has resorted to bingo, bazaars, and bellicose preaching to save its fleeing membership. It is time the modern liberal church regained its confidence in the experiential nature of its spiritual affirmation.

Prayer and healing are what this section is about. Modern men and women find prayer no longer easy, except in times of crisis. But in those times of physical and mental crisis, it is to the men of science, the physicians and psychotherapists they turn first. Prayer and healing have long been a vital part of the church's contact with the power of spiritual reality to touch and redeem human experience. It is the biblical witness that the People of God proclaimed the dramatic breakthrough of the Spirit to life through these disciplines. Christ taught that God and the world of spirit make a direct impression on man's soul. In Jesus Christ, God was perceived by the church to be the vivifying and energizing power of life over death. As Donald Gray reminds us,

...if christology is not good news about what God is doing in our lives and in the social and political history in which we live, and move, and have our being, then it is reduced to a report about something past which cannot really touch our lives and bring us healing.<sup>31</sup>

How does prayer fit in with the church's psychotheological ministry? The answer begins with the affirmation that prayer is the development of a religious consciousness. It is nothing if it is not a means of spiritual experience. William James writes that the nature of

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<sup>31</sup>Gray, p. 134.



religious phenomena always consists "in the consciousness which individuals have of an intercourse between themselves and higher powers with which they feel themselves related."<sup>32</sup> For James, a prayer is religion in act; it is nothing if it does not bring about a personal relation to divine reality in which the one who prays actually "feels the presence."<sup>33</sup>

The second proposition regarding prayer has to do with its theopoetic aspect. I agree with Gregory Baum who says that prayer begins with God. He writes:

Prayer, as any salvational relation between God and man, always begins with God...We may not define prayer, therefore, as if it were a conversation that begins with man! Prayer is always and every time initiated by God. God speaks first; man then listens and responds. Listening always precedes the response. Prayer must, therefore, be defined as man's listening and responding to the divine Word.<sup>34</sup>

Theopoetic prayer begins with God as he addresses us in the symbols, myths, and images of the phenomenal world. Through these, his divine nature makes its impact on human consciousness.

Theopoetic prayer is awareness of the God who is revealed in the essential aspects of human experience to the extent that a man or woman realizes his encounter with divine reality. Thus, bread and wine, salt and seed can speak of God. But more than this, it is

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<sup>32</sup>William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (New York: Collier, 1961), p. 362.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 361.

<sup>34</sup>Gregory Baum, Man Becoming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 255.

responsive awareness, for in prayer man knows himself to be called to co-creativity with God. In prayer my own selfish selfhood is indicted, and I see my life as sinful, as missing the mark. It is then that the true goal of my life is made known: to become a personal manifestation of the Creator's creativity. If God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves, it is in knowing our true Self that we know God, and such knowledge is always creative, for because of it my life is made new and made whole. Gregory Baum underlines the point this way:

...entry into a new consciousness indeed creates a radical change in the lives of men. When men come to know the mystery that occurs in them and their community, they are able to reorientate their lives in accordance with this mystery and make it a principle of their own self-making. This is a radical reorientation of life.<sup>35</sup>

This reorientation is what the church has known as metanoia, the repentance or change of mind necessary for realization of the kingdom of God within.

A short definition of theopoetic prayer might be this: responsive co-creativity. Prayer takes place for the Christian when he reflects on his own experience, be it psychic or social, seeking to discern the divine voice, and then responds by redirecting his life in alignment with the creative reality he knows as God's self-revelation. Created in the image of God, the person who is engaged in prayer seeks to become more aware of how God mirrors the divine purpose on the human soul and then structures his life in correspondence to those purposes. As the German mystic and poetess Mechthild writes in

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

theopoetic style:

Unless thou lead me, Lord, I cannot dance;  
Would'st thou have me leap and spring,  
Thou thyself, dear Lord, must sing,  
So shall I spring into they love,  
From thy love to understanding,  
From understanding to delight.<sup>36</sup>

Prayer is the call to act. It is not hopeful whistling in the dark as many have claimed in derision; it is being called to whistle the Lord's tune, to dance and even to mourn. It is indeed a contradiction for the person of prayer to come away with no sense of having heard the divine admonition, the "still small voice" that beckons the heart to respond. Such an empty experience deserves the indictment of Jesus:

"We piped to you,  
and you would not dance.  
We wailed,  
and you would not mourn."<sup>37</sup>

There is one further point to be made. If prayer is understood as responsive co-creativity, then prayer is primarily an experience of self-identity. Prayer makes me who I am by calling me to be a vital part of the living Body of Christ in the world. Self-identity, in the Christian sense, is to affirm that God is a present reality in our lives because Jesus Christ, to the extent that we can say with Paul: "I live, yet not I, but Christ who lives in me." Prayer is the essential means of coming to this realization. The late Thomas Merton expressed this truth in the last talk he gave in the United States before

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<sup>36</sup>quoted In Evelyn Underhill, The Essentials of Mysticism (New York: Dutton, 1960), p. 82.

<sup>37</sup>Matthew 11:17.

he left on his fateful Asian tour:

In prayer we discover what we already have. You start where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realize that you are already there. We already have everything, but we don't know it and we don't experience it. Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess.<sup>38</sup>

Christian ministry in the twentieth century must have a psycho-theological orientation if it is to survive. No longer can secular man rely on society and the scientific intellectual milieu to support his religious convictions; he must have an experiential foundation for his faith. Karl Rahner has put it rather boldly: "the devout Christian of the future will either be a 'mystic,' one who has 'experienced' something, or he will cease to be anything at all."<sup>39</sup>

Our situation today is not altogether different from the religious and cultural climate which Jesus faced. Beside the political corruption that was rampant then, the Jewish religion was becoming static and stale. It had been a long time since the miracles of the Exodus and the dramatic influence of ecstatic prophets. The religion of the Jews consisted in making God's righteousness manifest in their external lives. They longed for a direct revelation of God's power to redeem his people. Jesus came and through his ministry, their hunger and thirsting was quenched. The people whom Jesus contacted experienced God's power in many ways, one of the chief means being his ability to heal. Because of his influence, the lives of the disciples and the

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<sup>38</sup>Jean Steindl -Rast, "Recollections of Thomas Merton's Last Days in the West," Monastic Studies, VII (Spring 1971), pp. 2,3.

<sup>39</sup>Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations, VII (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), p. 15.

early church were anything but sedate.

Jesus was a sacrificial servant who preached, taught and healed. Nearly one-fifth of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry is devoted to his healing and the discussions which resulted from this work.<sup>40</sup> No other human experience received so much attention in the narratives. Jesus clearly intended for his disciples to carry on such a display of God's power to make men and women whole.<sup>41</sup> This seemed to be the implicit understanding of the early church as exhibited in the remarkable words of Jesus from John's gospel:

In truth, in very truth I tell you,  
he who has faith in me will do what I am doing;  
and he will do greater works still  
because I am going to the Father.  
Indeed anything you ask in my name  
I will do,  
so that the Father may be glorified  
in the Son.  
If you ask anything in my name  
I will do it.<sup>42</sup>

As one reads account after account of the mental and physical healing Jesus performed and how fully he expected his followers to emulate him, it is astonishing how little emphasis or even credence is given to them by the modern church.

It is also important to note that such work on the part of Jesus no doubt contributed to his persecution. This seems to be

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<sup>40</sup>Kelsey, Healing and Christianity, p. 54

<sup>41</sup>Mark 6: 7-13, Matthew 10: 5-10, Luke 9: 1-6.

<sup>42</sup>John 14: 12-14 (NEB)

verified both in and even outside the biblical record:

In the Talmud (Sanhedrin 43a) we find the tradition that Jesus of Nazareth was hanged on a tree on the Passover Eve because he practiced sorcery; he was destroyed because he healed by calling upon evil forces rather than upon God. This tradition is confirmed in Mark 3:22. When Jesus went home to Nazareth, he was simply besieged by people who wanted to be healed. His friends tried to seize him, saying that he was beside himself, and the Pharisees claimed he was possessed by Beelzebub and that it was by the prince of demons that he cast out demons. Even his opponents did not try to contest the fact that Jesus healed but only to cast doubts upon the agency through which he did it.<sup>43</sup>

It is not within the scope of this brief section to deal with the reasons why the Christian church slowly withdrew from the practice of healing until in modern times we have almost outright rejection of the plausibility of such a fact. Suffice it to say here that such "miracles" were denied more on the basis that such phenomena do not happen today than on the possibility of their happening then. It cannot be denied that the efficacy for miraculous deeds depends to an extent on the assumptive world of the participants,<sup>44</sup> but that is also to say that our modern assumptions about the possibility of the Spirit's breakthrough into our physical world may be the sole reason such events are not more common than they are.

Because I am convinced that the ministry of healing is a powerful experiential tool and perhaps the central means for showing forth

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<sup>43</sup>Kelsey, "Healing and Christianity," p. 57.

<sup>44</sup>The reader is reminded of Mark 6:1-6, where Jesus "came to his own country" and was actually limited in what he could do because of the people's attitude. The passage reads that "he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them," but that "he could do no mighty work there." (vs. 5). The concluding verse reads, "And he marveled because of their unbelief." (vs. 6).

the reality of salvational love, I want to list a few suggestions as to how it might again be included in the church's discipline. The first would be to change the assumptive world of the Christian people. The modern Christian, it would appear, operates more on the proposition that physical and mental problems are caused by God and combatted medicinally. They find greater comfort in having illnesses treated by material means than by the ability of God to transform the whole person and bring healing. In my own ministry, I have found many a church member living under the notion that when sickness came it was God's will. One woman actually told me she believed that God wanted her to be sick. Another young person, who unashamedly calls herself a "Jesus Person," suffered from an ovarian cyst and was forced to enter the hospital for treatment. She explained her situation to me by stating, "God had given me this malady so that I might minister to people in the hospital and tell them about the Lord." It strikes me as anything but a victorious affirmation of faith to be suffering from disease by the hand of God so that one could tell of his life-giving love.

Another assumption under which many Christians live is the idea that illness and suffering is completely the result of personal sin. This kind of thinking was also the world-view of the people in Jesus' time. It is the idea that ill will or wrong deeds are to be punished and God punishes by means of sickness. From the ministry of Jesus we observe that this is not the case at all:

Nowhere in the Gospels is there any suggestion of Jesus asking a sick person what he had done or whether he had sinned before healing him. Instead he took direct action to meet the need... Thus he made clear that men in their present condition do not deserve or need judgment and punishment which only drive them

further into despair and defeat.<sup>45</sup>

Only twice did Jesus even talk to sick people about their sin; one is the paralytic<sup>46</sup>—which seems to show that the sin was a block to the man's healing rather than the cause--and the other was the man healed beside the pool of Bethesda<sup>47</sup> in which Jesus later warned the man not to sin again or something worse might befall him. Jesus would not disagree with the idea that sin could bring trouble and disease to the individual, but he healed to show that it was God's will for people to be made whole, not to suffer from brokenness and sin.

The second suggestion I would offer in making the practice of healing a part of the church's psychotheological ministry is to find ways to awaken the spirit that lies deep within people, waiting to be touched. One way for this to be done is the development of a theopoetic consciousness. Obviously, the dynamic personality of Jesus, the way in which the power of God seemed to vibrate through him, had a profound psychic effect upon the masses. But even so, there is ample evidence that he would continually turn attention away from himself toward that Power he seemed to channel. In other words, a slim case, if at all, could be made of Jesus as merely a psychic healer with paranormal powers, but rather, it was who he was and what he did that seemed to have such creative force upon the minds and bodies of the

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<sup>45</sup>Kelsey, Healing and Christianity, p. 65.

<sup>46</sup>Matthew 9:2-8, also Mark 2:5 ff and Luke 5:20 ff)

<sup>47</sup>John 5:14.



diseased. His healing flowed from his God-consciousness.

With regard to prayer, I have already discussed what this theopoetic consciousness implies. It is an awareness on the part of an individual of his responsive co-creativity, of knowing his healing comes from God and is a present reality within only waiting to be drawn into use. Jesus seemed to have the dynamic ability to draw out this kind of healing responsiveness from people. He knew the importance of the proper spiritual environment conducive to healing. For instance, in Mark 8:22-26, we find that Jesus took a blind man out of the village away from the crush of onlookers. No healing side-show did Jesus run. Through special healing services, preaching, and personal visitation, the modern church can seek the kind of spiritual environment that will draw out the proper consciousness among the people which promotes real healing rather than adjustment to disease. Through the kind of shamanistic ministry described above, the elder or the pastor can apply the proper theopoetic technique for healing, whether it be dream therapy, reprogramming personal myths, exorcism of psychic disturbances, or the laying on of hands and the anointing with oil. None of these, of course, is to be a substitute for medical observation and medicines if needed, but simply to promote the healing which is the miracle of the body and never the property of man.

The final suggestion is related to the last. It is that the healing of Jesus and the practice of the church is primarily sacramental in nature. The responsive co-creativity in the individual which was the potential for wholeness was drawn out by methods of touching, anointing, speaking commands, compassion and forgiveness. By these

the potency of the living God to recreate the life of the suffering was made known. Sacramental healing recognizes the impact of symbols, gestures, and words spoken in an environment of faith upon the human psyche.

Sacraments in the believing community have great power to call forth responsive co-creativity in the depths of human consciousness. When a church has begun to take the reality of healing seriously, and realizes that medical doctors prescribe drugs primarily to remove the physical blocks to bodily restoration and that God's Spirit must also remove the spiritual blocks to wholeness, then it is that the whole process is seen in its proper perspective. Healing is the work of God in the individual and nothing should stand in the way. This kind of positive attitude can be communicated best through the symbolic shorthand of sacrament. The laying on of hands and a word of thanksgiving for the restoration of wholeness now taking place in the body, the touch of oil to the forehead making the sign of the cross, or the Lord's Supper given to the hospital patient with a liturgy appropriate to his need are just a few of the sacramental acts that can be shared.

#### THEOPOETIC TEACHING AND LITURGY

We have seen that the task of showing the reality of the spiritual world within the physical world is not easy. It will mean an entire process of reeducation. The task of teaching in the psycho-theological sense, then is one of leading men and women to discover the redemptive mystery already present and at work in their lives. The first stage of this task will be to change the assumptive patterns

of thought. The church can do this by providing discussion groups and clinics concerned with the religious aspects of their daily experience. There is a great need for groups where the basic ideas and experiences of Christianity can be openly examined and understood and then discovered as valid possibilities in the twentieth century. Paranormal phenomena can be an important topic that would engage people in considering the possibility of spiritual reality. Many who are open to psychic phenomena sometimes are strangely closed-minded about the reports of strange occurrences in the Bible.

The second aspect of the church's teaching discipline that needs more stress might best be termed sacramental consciousness-raising. That is, lifting people's awareness of the breakthrough of God's Spirit in their lives which goes unnoticed. It means helping people to regain the wonder and awe that is often lost in adulthood. Theopoetic teaching would encourage people to observe and remember the many joyous experiences that teach us about God's loving presence, as well as the suffering and pain which remind us of his compassionate concern. People can learn to tell their life's story as a personal mythology and seek to find the meaning inherent in the plot. Dreams can be recorded and remembered and discussed as possible spiritual revelations. Theophanies can be described as they have appeared to saints of old, and then many may want to recall if they too might have had similar experiences, though not quite as embellished.

A third aspect of theopoetic teaching is the development of modes of artistic expression. What this means is that the people of God should begin to learn how to think theopoetically about life, to

express the fullness of their religious experience. With a raised consciousness, one begins an exciting adventure of discovering new possibilities for seeing God in the world than ever suspected. These can find expression in a variety of modes, and often, the experience of discovery itself will choose the appropriate mode of expression.

The church would do well to maintain a close relationship with the artistic community. The church can both sponsor and support various projects that speak to the spiritual condition of modern man. Beyond this, the religious community will experiment in creative writing, sculpture, graphics, textile art, and a variety of other means to witness to the reality of God in Jesus Christ which has called her into being. These works of art are then to be seen as the manifestation of the holiness of secular existence, as the appearance of the Christ whose existence is coterminous with humanity's. These theopoetic celebrations give witness through symbol and sign that God is being adored, experienced, and accepted.

And finally, this section on the church's internal discipline would not be complete without a brief discussion of Christian worship. It is when Christians come together to celebrate the experience of God in Jesus Christ through worship that the church is most theopoetic. In the majestic movement of the liturgy and the psychotheological impact of the symbols of the human psyche, the church shares its own vital self-understanding in the richest possible way.

In the theopoetic sense, worship can be defined as the world-centered, Spirit-responsive Event. Liturgy is the "work of the people" who are open to the Spirit as they discern the signs and symbols of

God's self-revelation in the world. The sacraments of the church, lifted up in Christian worship, do not summon us out of life for an encounter with divine mystery apart from the world, but rather they send us to the experience of life itself and the God who is revealed therein. Sacraments light up for us what is taking place in all of life by making us more sensitive to the depths of our experience, and thereby deepening our response to God in the world and in other people.

According to our definition, liturgy is first of all world-centered. God does not meet his creation anywhere but within his creation. For the Christian, there is no other world in which God has spoken his Word of redemption than in this world, no world into which he has shown his grace other than this world, no world but this one is the proper arena of Christian life and witness. The Christian understands that God's sacred Act in Jesus Christ was performed in this profane world and there is no other place to look for God's continuous work of reconciliation than right here in the common world of human experience.

Because of the incarnation, men and women have come to know in a psychotheological sense that the process of humanization is the process of divination. The Eucharist is the supreme theopoetic symbol of this reality of consciousness. The bread and wine that are celebrated in Holy Communion are not made by a bakery in heaven, but by the combined work of people whose labor is given for mutual nourishment. This gift of humanity becomes one with the Gift of God in the mystery of God's interconnectedness with the destiny of us all. In eating our own bread and drinking our own wine at the Table of the Lord, we are

nourished in a spiritual sense that moves beyond physical satisfaction.

By world-centered worship, I mean that God must be celebrated as a shared reality ever incarnate within life. When worship ceases to be world-centered, then it becomes separated from life, other-worldly, and finally an end in itself. No longer does it then speak to what I know to be the case in life, but points to something that lies beyond this world, and therefore, outside of the human grasp. As such, it can be anything but Christian. When liturgy so mislocates the divine, then it is properly abandoned. But liturgy that deciphers human experience as the locus of divine action is always embraced.

The second aspect of worship in the theopoetic sense, is that it is Spirit centered. By Spirit-centered I mean two things. First, that worship should center an individual in his spiritual identity with God. We meet God in terms of what is highest in ourselves, in our own personhood. Concentration on this through liturgy is allowing the Spirit of God to become known. We open ourselves to God in the most central and vital way we can--through theopoetic symbols that reveal the Christ-within--and find that we are met there by God, which means we will experience him as person too. Sacramental rituals and liturgies orient a person to the covenantal mystery of life and awaken within him the spirit of responsive co-creativity.

The other meaning implied in Spirit-centered worship has to do with spontaneity. "Audiences know what to expect," says a character in the play Rosecrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, "and that is all they

are prepared to believe in.<sup>48</sup> Does God work in expected ways? No, his Spirit is often a serendipity of joy. Should not the morning celebration be able to respond to the movement of the numinous as it becomes evidenced in the lives of the people gathered? I believe that one of the reasons Pentecostals and others of the "charismatic movement" have grown in such numbers in recent years has to do with this spiritual spontaneity. There appears to be more going on than just a hundred people reading responses, listening to a sermon or singing a hymn. There is the electric feeling that "the spirit is a moverin'," and when a raised palm is shot in the air it is with the expectancy that God will make himself known.

The argument can no doubt be made that such services are led by men who are masters of crowd psychology as much as they are fundamentalist preachers. Maybe so. But my argument is that we must take worship beyond the protective ritual to "make it more possible for man not only to fully face his human situation but also to celebrate it in all its awesome reality."<sup>49</sup> It is the "awesome reality" of it all that is the realm of the Spirit. The minister or liturgical director is the one who--shaman-like--assists people in spiritual discernment, who raises their sacramental consciousness to new levels of God-awareness. He or she is a person of prayer who teaches others the value of prayer

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<sup>48</sup>Tom Stoppard, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 61

<sup>49</sup>Henri J. M. Nouwen, Creative Ministry (New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. 90.

as responsive co-creativity, to the end that they too are able to

...see what he saw, to hear what he heard, to touch what he touched, and to break down the wall that separates them from the "Unseen" (W. James) Reality of the universe. Then he will keep searching for ways and channels, forms and rituals, songs, dances, and gestures that enable man to come into vibrant contact with the Holy without fear. Then he will make it possible for his fellow man to take down his scaffolding and to freely celebrate life.<sup>50</sup>

The purpose of the liturgy is to open to us the movement of God's Spirit as he seeks to use the situation to make his love known. When this happens, the worship will not be a program or a service, it will be an Event. This is the final ingredient of a theopoetic definition of worship. Churches of the future had better not discard the old, worn-out word "happening." The quality of worship in the next decade will largely be determined by a sense of what happened. Have you ever noticed how older people, who grew up with linear, discursive language and thought forms would ask about the worship they missed by saying, "Tell me, what did the Preacher say?" But youth, who have assimilated the idea that the medium is the real meaning of the message are more apt to ask, "What happened in church today?"

One further point should be made regarding the nature of the liturgical event. With all the recent ventures into experimental styles of worship, (festivity, rock music, light and slide shows) the question needs to be asked regarding the kind of Event we are after. Often, there are several events that go on "up front," or the people gathered must interact in some spontaneous way for there to be real

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 105



community. Which of these is needed for there to be a world-centered, spirit-responsive Event? The answer, ironically, is both and neither. The real event is psychotheological; that is, its impact is brought about by the liturgical symbols and human interaction which point one to God, but the actual communion with God takes place in the depths of human consciousness. Because of this, the spiritual needs of the individual will dictate the impact of the worship service and determine how "event-ful" it turns out to be.

The following analogy suggested by Royal F. Shepard, Jr., best illustrates what I mean:

A man may walk into a strange bar with the intent of nursing his own beer in a dark corner. He seeks privacy, yet he feels sustained by the presence of others engaged in the same pursuit. There is a fellowship of anonymity in a dimly lighted cocktail lounge that enables a man to think his own thoughts with more comfort than he might find shut up all alone in his room at home. On the other hand, a man may walk into his neighborhood pub, a clean, well-lighted place where everyone talks to everyone else and where each buys a round for others in turn. There is a kind of corporate worship that is analogous to the first of these settings, and multitudes slip into shadowy naves each Sunday with that sort of experience in view. But the advocates of celebration would have us up on the stool exchanging toasts. Needless to say, the role of the bartender varies, depending on the setting.<sup>51</sup>

There simply is no obvious answer to the riddle of what style of worship is best. The role of the minister as shaman (or bartender) is that of determining the needs of the people who come together and lifting up the proper theopoetic liturgy that best speaks to their

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<sup>51</sup>Royal F. Shepard, Jr., "Within, Between, and Beyond: An Exploration Along the Boundaries of Theology and Spirituality," Religion in Life, XLI:3 (Autumn 1972), 324.

situation. The first Christian symbol, it is said, was not the cross but the fish, the ichthus. Someone recognized the transforming value of the fish in the collective psyche of the first century Christians and incorporated it into the liturgy. The sign of the fish was a powerful theopoetic image because Jesus had become known to them when they were about their common task of fishing. He sailed with them, saved their boat from sinking in a storm, and had even shown them how to increase their catch. It was even their experience that Jesus had not only been raised from the dead, but had later found them by the seashore one morning and ate fish with them for breakfast. It was as Jesus became involved in their world of fishing that they realized his Christic nature. The sign of the fish had therefore become the central symbol of early Christian community and an indication that worship was about to take place. It was not the call to a new event of worship, but a re-call of the Event which the symbol of the fish brought to consciousness. So it is that any theopoetic liturgy will be powerful only to the extent that it speaks to the experience of the people. Rock music will not excite the aged, "Rock of Ages" may not turn on the young people. To carry on the analogy of Shepard, the bartender had better be careful what kind of drinks he serves up, and to whom.

## Chapter 5

### THE CHURCH'S THEOPOETIC WITNESS

The church is called into being by God through Jesus Christ to responsive co-creativity. As the Body of Christ, she points to the world as the arena of God's activity and celebrates the presence of God in human experience. The church is both a sign pointing beyond herself to God and a symbol through which the creative reality of God is made known to the world.

In our time, we see the church moving away from the world or becoming so identified with worldly ways that there remains no distinction. The church must not smugly draw her institutional robes tightly around her body to block out the chill realities of the world, for the world ignores the self-righteous. Jesus did not shut himself off from people or adopt a priestly pose and identify himself with conservative religious practice. In fact, he daringly predicted to the traditionalists that their beloved Temple, which was the center of their highly institutionalized religion, would be destroyed, and then where would they be? To follow her Master, the Church's witness, like her worship, is world-centered and Spirit-responsive. Worship is how she celebrates God's creative Event, her witness is how she lives it.

Karl Rahner focused the issue rather clearly when he wrote:  
"Christianity can be regarded as the clear affirmation of what man

obscurely experiences in his concrete existence." <sup>1</sup> We have already noted at length the tendency upon the part of secular man to polarize the sacred and the profane. How this can be overcome in society is the concern of the church. What society needs, says Harvey Cox in Feasts of Fools, is a kind of "meta-institution" which exists to bring together the worlds of fact and fantasy, which is in touch with the most advanced artistic movement of the day and with both historical and transhistorical images of the future. But the church, he says, has thus far turned down its opportunity to become this meta-institution, because it has been unwilling to risk its propertied status in Caesar's society. He writes:

...the sad truth is that the church cannot be the meta-institution our world needs to instruct us in festivity, to open us to fantasy, to call us to tomorrow, or to enlarge our petty definitions of reality. It cannot for only one reason: that reason is because the church is not the church.<sup>2</sup>

For the church to be the church she must remain both the witness of what God's love is doing in the world as well as the channel of that very love. She must be both the Perceiver and the Transceiver of the grace which is reconciling the world. How the church shares itself with the humanity through preaching, counseling and social action is the concern of this chapter. These are the theopoetic ways in which Christianity has sought to give clear affirmation to what man

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<sup>1</sup>Karl Rahner, Do You Believe in God? (New York: Paulist Press, 1969), pp. 7, 8.

<sup>2</sup>Harvey Cox, The Feast of Fools (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 95.

experiences in his concrete existence.

### THEOPOETIC PREACHING

I played God today  
 And it was fun!  
 I made animals that men had never seen  
 So they would stop and scratch their heads  
 Instead of scowling.  
 I made words that men had never heard  
 So they would stop and stare at me  
 Instead of running.  
 And I made love that laughed  
 So men would giggle like children  
 Instead of sighing.  
 Tomorrow perhaps, I won't be God  
 And you will know it  
 Because you won't see any three-headed cats  
 Or bushes with bells on...  
 I wish I could always play God<sup>3</sup>  
 So lonely men could laugh!<sup>3</sup>

I should like boldly to compare preaching with Kavanaugh's "playing God," in the poetic sense he uses the term. Proclamation is co-creativity with God and nothing less, for true Christian preaching can cause us to stop in our tracks, to scratch our heads or even giggle like children. Preaching Christ can be just this kind of "stumbling block."<sup>4</sup>

The theopoetic style in which the preacher "plays God" is not to make animals in the sense of "three-headed cats," but in the sense that a giraffe is a horse designed by a committee. That is, a sermon is a proclamation designed by the committee of God and man. Left to

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<sup>3</sup>James Kavanaugh, There Are Men Too Gentle to Live Among Wolves (Los Angeles: Nash, 1970), p. 18.

<sup>4</sup>I Corinthians 4:18.

the devices of man, the message is a wormy cocoon, merely beauty in potential; but when the dimension of God is added, it becomes a winged butterfly--almost a contradiction of what it started out to be--but nevertheless its fulfillment.

Preaching is a human word pushed and punctuated by hold power; a word from the other side backed up and validated by the Holy Ghost, it's a journey from the finite to the infinite and back again; it's a divine symphony played on the instrument of the human tongue; it's God's instrument for healing the brokenhearted and breaking the hardhearted.<sup>5</sup>

If it is only the word of man, preaching becomes a little more than crude, shot-from-the-hip analysis. It is no more forceful than something Bogart might say to a congregation:

Alright now,  
you dirty ratsh!  
This is the way it is with God's love,  
shee?  
--you dirty ratsh?

When God is on the sermon committee, a partner in preaching, the message is lifted from the sedate to the sensate, from the mundane to the magical, as in these rhythmic lines from a sermon titled, "They Shall Ask the Way," preached by Gardiner Taylor:

In the beleaguered catacombs, in a humble upper room during the treasured hour around the table of the Lord,  
the early Christians wiped away their early differences of race,  
awed a world with their devotion to all men,  
snapped the fascination which old Rome had over them,  
drew grasps of wonder from their generation,  
raised the banner of a new Kingdom  
and made the name of Christ a household word  
in homes around the Mediterranean.

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<sup>5</sup>William Augustus Jones, quoted in Lawrence Edward Carter, "Black Preaching: Poetry and a Text," Andover Newton Quarterly, XI: (January 1971), 14.

'Do we ask the way to Zion?'

Across the centuries his clear voice declares ' I am the way'

--a family of God,

a brotherhood originating in me,

a comradeship beginning at Calvary,

a colony of heaven in earth,

a blessed fellowship,

closed ranks of a marching army moving to

the music of God's stirring act in Christ

--'I am the way.'<sup>6</sup>

It is my opinion that the most recognizable model of theopoetic preaching in our time is black preaching. While it communicates the racial spirit of Afro-American originality in particular, black preaching at its best is a trans-cultural phenomenon expressing universal ideas and profound feeling covering the entire range of human experience. While a non-white could never become a "black preacher," it could be said that both might share a theopoetic style if the sermon moves beyond oratory and enters the artistic domain of "preaching event." I submit now a black preacher's explanation of his ethnic homiletical heritage. Since the archetypal nature of theopoetics implies a trans-cultural as well as a trans-historical grounding in human consciousness, I would argue that elements of the following definition could and should be found in the best of all Christian preaching:

Black sermons are imaginative interpretations and interpolations of scripture. It seems that while white man is demythologizing the Bible, the Black man is remythologizing and supermythologizing scripture. He uses his imagination freely without violating the meaning of the text.

The most unique quality of Black preaching is its becoming

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 16, 17.

artfully intensified into music and rhythm. As the discourse develops and the congregation enters into a rhythmic dialogue with the preacher, answering him with emotional fervor, the spoken discourse begins to boil into an opera-like musical dramatization of the Gospel. The language becomes rhythmically poetic; the tune becomes evident, and the speech fulfills itself in song. The most beautiful aspect of Black preaching is that it sets the Gospel to music in a dramatic and unusual way. It is my belief that the Black sermon preceded and became the source of the Black spiritual.<sup>7</sup>

One point is especially crucial. Many would argue that the "rhythmically poetic" rendition of the Gospel is a particular outgrowth of the Black experience alone. Conversely, I would suggest that this kind of dramatization in preaching is not ethnic dialect alone, but is essential to the Gospel when it is communicated with the power of its own spiritual momentum. It is true that such poetic pageantry has typified black preaching, but the reason for this might just as well be attributed to its lack in white preaching. The great black orator James Weldon Johnson once wryly recalled how he "witnessed congregations moved to ecstasy by the rhythmic intoning of sheer incoherencies."<sup>8</sup> Apparently the experience of Paul in his visit to the Corinthian congregation was not much different; at least he was not concerned with rationalism:

"When I came to you, brethren,  
I did not come proclaiming to you  
the testimony of God in lofty words of wisdom  
For I decided to know nothing among you  
except Jesus Christ

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<sup>7</sup>Charles G. Adams, "Some Aspects of Black Worship," Andover Newton Quarterly, XI (January 1971), 17.

<sup>8</sup>quoted in Carter, p. 15.



and him crucified.  
 ...my speech and my message  
 were not in plausible words of wisdom,  
 but in demonstration of the Spirit  
 and power,  
 that your faith might not rest  
 in the wisdom of men  
 but in the power of God.<sup>9</sup>

Theopoetic preaching, then is the "playful" proclamation of the Gospel in Spirit-demonstrative images which move beyond the plausibility of words to the end that faith in the power of God is produced. This definition seems to fit in with Paul's use of the Corinthian pulpit. In fact, the first two chapters of his first letter to the church at Corinth provides an excellent scriptural rationale for theopoetic preaching. The following conclusions might well be drawn from the apostle's discourse on how best to share the Gospel:

(1) Discursive oratory, however, eloquent, produces a vacuous interpretation of the cross of Christ. ("...preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power," 1:17). There seems to be something of transforming power inherent in the symbol of Christ's cross. Such a symbol of redemption cannot be treated with the same kind of rhetorical precision you might address the Toastmaster's Club without it becoming sapped of vitality.

(2) In the fanciful folly of living symbols lies the power of God. ("For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God," 1:18). It's apparently all a matter of perspective. Outside the community of faith,

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<sup>9</sup>I Corinthians 2: 1, 2, 4.

the incite-full "word of the cross" seems mere foolishness. It's like an inside joke--the oft-repeated punchline is so much ridiculous verbiage to those who are not "in" on the meaning. With regard to the cross, the "punch" is still there except that it's no joke!

(3) The Gospel is most powerful when communicated in mythic imagery, and strikingly impotent when reduced to words of wisdom, however true. ("For in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe," 1:21). Myths, symbols, rhythmic renditions of images and the like are spiritually demonstrative while at the same time intellectually confounding.

(4) The purpose of a sermon is not to point direction by means of cute little guidelines ("Jews demand a sign"), but to force an existential double-take; not to stimulate the mind ("Greeks seek wisdom"), but to confound the intellect. ("...but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." 1:23,24). The audacity of the Gospel, and its power, lies in the impact it makes on human consciousness. When the Gift of God in the crucified Christ is reduced to little rules for living or witty sayings, the Gospel is lost. It is preached in power, however, when with symbol and metaphor, the message causes people to stumble and take notice, to scratch their heads and think about their life.

(5) The cerebral man is caught off guard by a good sermon; even the intellectual, the writer, and the debater are thwarted in

their attempt to produce anything of comparable value. ("For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart. Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?' 1:19, 20). No one can really argue with a good sermon, for it makes no philosophical proposition but promotes the power of a Person.

(6) God has embedded within the depths of human consciousness the archetypal symbols through which the wisdom of God is revealed. Theopoetic preaching, because of its symbolic character, speaks in the language of the psyche to reveal those spiritual "secrets" which might be otherwise hidden. ("But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages of our glorification," 2:7). This is the psychotheological nature of preaching. Theopoetic images seem to resonate in the human psyche (soul) where "deep calls to deep." Or to put it more graphically, such preaching bypasses the intellect en route to the heart via the road map of the soul.

(7) Theopoetic preaching is meta-verbal, that is, something spiritual is communicated beyond what the words themselves convey. ("God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God," 2:11, 10). The "depths of God" are interpreted within the psyche when the Spirit is evoked by the sermon's imagery, rhythm and cadence. A sermon, therefore, must be oral. Reading a sermon is not nearly so spiritually

evocative. It was Albert Schweitzer who said that written sermons are like embalmed babies, beautiful but dead.<sup>10</sup>

(8) Theopoetic preaching is truly "playing God" in the spiritual sense that the message comes from the mind of Christ. ("But we have the mind of Christ," 2:16). Christ is the inspirational Center of the creative preacher. It is out of the mind of Christ that Christian preaching begins, for that is the fountainhead from which all Christian symbolization flows.

#### THEOPOETIC COUNSELING

The church seeks to call men and women to the salvation and wholeness of which God has achieved in Jesus Christ. It is already a fact which the church recognizes in her own experience, but to which she must also witness because it is yet unrealized in the lives of so many. In the last chapter, I set forth the thesis that physical and mental healing is central to the church's ministry in manifesting God's redemptive power in the world. The special emphasis of that section was primarily physical healing, whereas, the concern here is for the mental and emotional side of the human personality. Because pastoral counseling is increasingly becoming a major part of the minister's task, it deserves our attention.

The problem with many psychologies is that they use techniques to trace the historical origin of a person's neurotic and phobic symptoms back to particular inner or outer events of childhood, an

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

admirable form of detective work if one agrees with the assumption that the individual IS the sum total of his past. Often, the patient is told to make peace with his old scars, to adjust to them rather than to face up to his shadowy side which forever haunts him and is the cause of psychic disturbances. These ghastly apparitions must be exorcised for a person to see his true self with clarity. Just as a sculptor brings form to a rock by chipping away whatever is unneeded, so the therapists aim is to enable a clients inner person to emerge by removing obstacles, or rather, by letting these melt in the fire of a raised consciousness.

Jung's approach, and my adapted thesis here, is essentially one of illuminating ordinary experience with the light of the mythical. Instead of pointing out the inconsequential, the regressive and negative aspects of life and dreams, Jung attempts to show that in very bit of ordinary existence there lie the great laws, the great symbols, the great issues. For him, the transcendent is known in the apparently accidental, and the emergence of the archetypal is accomplished by nourishing it with its own reflection. Jung's approach is that of coaxing the awareness of the true self by presenting it with a mirror in the therapist's observations and in the mythical themes which speak of man's core of common experience. Put another way, "concepts are coined and negotiable values; images are life."<sup>11</sup>

This I believe to be an essentially Christian approach to

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<sup>11</sup> Carl Jung, Psychological Reflections (Princeton: University Press, 1953), p. 201.

human transformation. Not that Jesus was a Jungian, but that there is evidence the early church recognized the mythical power of Jesus' life and ministry and attributed to him this same technique of coaxing an inner awareness of the self by the use of archetypal imagery. The pericope about the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 is a case in point. Here, Jesus lifts up the archetypal symbol of water, or "living water" (v. 10), as the image of ebullient wholeness of life which quenches thirsty desires:

"The water that I shall give...will be  
an inner spring always welling up for eternal life."

"Sir, 'said the woman, 'give me that water,  
and then I shall not be thirsty, nor have to  
come all this way to draw.'"<sup>12</sup>

As this very dramatic story relates, the mere mention of the "inner spring" which bubbles up an eternal quality of life leads to a discussion of the woman's adulterous relationships which Jesus must have recognized as the cause of her "thirsting." The Nazarene then gives a rather psychotheological definition of God:

"God is spirit, and those who worship him  
must worship in spirit and in truth."<sup>13</sup>

This leads the woman to relate a concept about the coming Christ who will "tell us everything" (v. 25), to which Jesus replies that the revealing Christ is the one talking to her at that very moment, (v. 26). The last we hear of the woman she has returned to the city exclaiming.

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<sup>12</sup>John 4:14b-15 (NEB)

<sup>13</sup>John 4:24 (NEB)

"Come and see a man who has told me  
everything I ever did.  
Could this be the Messiah?"<sup>14</sup>

This moment of insight into her own nature, brought on by the therapeutic use of a theopoetic image is rather dramatic. The fact that the Samaritan woman is not a believer, nor even a Jew, does not matter in the least. Neither does it matter that John's gospel is largely mythic in content. What is important is that the early church recognized the power of archetypal images to transform all people and understood such use a valid, if not essential tool in bringing about redemption. Regarding the mythical nature of Christ, Jung felt that this did not detract from its factual truth at all. He concluded:

I would even go so far as to say that the mythical character of a life is just what expresses its universal human validity. It is perfectly possible, psychologically, for the unconscious or an archetype to take complete possession of a man [or a woman as in the scriptural case above] and to determine his fate down to a smallest detail. At the same time objective, nonpsychic parallel phenomena can occur which also represent the archetype. It not only seems so, it simply is so, that the archetype fulfills itself not only physically in the individual, but objectively outside the individual. My own conjecture is that Christ was such a personality.<sup>15</sup>

In the previous story of the Samaritan woman the inner psychic desire for the archetypal "living water" had its nonpsychic parallel in her social life. That is, her thirst for love was not being quenched, for the men she knew trickled through her life like water through a leaky jar. Incidentally, her life was so satisfied that she left her jar behind.

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<sup>14</sup>John 4:29 (NEB)

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 361. Bracketed statement added.

With regard to the theopoetic approach to counseling in the church, I am going to suggest two techniques which I have found successful in my ministry. The first can be used on a one to one basis, the second might be more suitable in working with groups, but will no doubt evoke significant psychic content to necessitate personal counseling on an individual basis. Both techniques might be called guided meditations and must begin with the leader suggesting some kind of "centering down" exercise to induce a deepened reflective pose.

The first guided meditation might be called "Conversing With The Inner Christ." The purpose here is to help people begin the process of communication with their higher self, symbolized by the "inner Christ." In essence, it is really a prayer, since the individual is talking to Christ as the contact point with God. If the person is an atheist, some term such as Inner Guide might be suggested. After centering down, the person is told to picture himself moving back in time, almost two thousand years, to the time of Christ. Next, the person is to picture himself alone on a hillside somewhere in the region of Galilee. There are green meadows and flowers all around. Time is allowed to picture the setting. The suggestion is also made for him to get in touch with what he wearing, and what the surrounding country looks like.

Next, the person hears voices off in the distance. A group of people are laughing. The person looks up and sees Jesus and a few of his disciples moving down the path by the hillside, talking in animated fashion. Suddenly, the subject realizes that he or she has something important to share with the Master. It is such a burning question that



he rushes over to the side of Jesus and asks if he could spare just five minutes of time to listen and help him with the problem. This is done, and the next five minutes is spent in silence.

The leader then suggests that time is up by saying that one of the disciples is interrupting your conversation, bidding Jesus to come away for they must journey a long distance to their destination. Jesus excuses himself and walks off down the road as the subject ponders the conversation he has just shared with the Nazarene. Time is allowed for quiet reflection and then the leader assists the person in returning to a normal state of consciousness.

The next step is for the therapist or minister and the subject to debrief the experience with special attention to the issue dealt with in the internal dialogue and the reaction of Jesus to it. What solution was arrived at? What opinions did Jesus share? How did it feel to be conversing with the Man of Galilee? How did it feel when the time came for him to leave?

In one particular session when I used this technique, a very strange thing happened. The man with whom I was working could not talk about the experience right away and another appointment was arranged. In meeting with him later, he related a most bizarre incident which took place in the middle of the meditation. No sooner had he started to share his burden with Jesus than he was pelted with rock. All of a sudden he was being stoned by the other disciples, who were jeering and calling him names. He could not continue talking to Jesus and was forced to run away in his mind. I asked him what it was that he had told Jesus and he told me that he had confided to him an adulterous

relationship he had entered into and broken off some years ago. Obviously, he was feeling very guilty about the situation and the stoning by the disciples only heightened his remorse to the extent that he could not talk about it any more.

I suggested that he try the meditation once more, only this time with Jesus alone. This he did and reported to me later, with an almost remarkable glow about his face that Jesus had understood and had forgiven him, with the added admonition that he must forgive himself. The second experience was truly healing, while the first had been terribly wounding. He now felt unburdened by this past episode in a way that he had never thought possible. The stoning by the disciples was the graphic demonstration of repressed guilt reaping its own vengeance. It proved to be such a psychic disturbance that he could not easily receive a word of forgiveness.

This guided meditation was really a confessional prayer for him. Without the symbolic imagery and picturesque symbolism of admission and pardon, he might not have been able to come to grips with such a problem. In the years that I was his pastor, he never confided to me the fact that this issue was unresolved in his life, nor did I even suspect that he carried any such burden or guilt. Only because of this simple theopoetic technique of symbolic fantasy did the desire for forgiveness rise to the surface and realize justification.

The second exercise uses the healing story of Mark 2: 1-12. In beginning the session, I discussed with the group the nature of dreams and the important psychological messages they may contain. We talked about symbolism and the fact that symbols are psyche-evokings.

That is, whether they originate in the unconscious and emerge to the surface or they are suggested from some external source, they evoke certain meanings to consciousness that may prove helpful in personal self-knowledge. Then I led the group in centering down. Following that, I asked them to visualize the following dream in their minds as vividly as possible. I read aloud rather slowly these first twelve verses of Mark, the second chapter:

When after some days he returned to Capernaum, the news went around that he was at home; and such a crowd collected that the space in front of the door was not big enough to hold them. And while he was proclaiming the message to them, a man was brought who was paralyzed. Four men were carrying him, but because of the crowd they could not get him near. So they opened up the roof over the place where Jesus was, and when they had broken through they lowered the stretcher on which the paralyzed man was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "My son, your sins are forgiven."

Now there were some lawyers sitting there and they thought to themselves, "Why does the fellow talk like that? This is blasphemy! Who but God alone can forgive sins?" Jesus knew what they were thinking, and said to them: "Why do you harbour thoughts like these? Is it easier to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up, take your bed, and walk'? But to convince you that the Son of Man has the right on earth to forgive sins"--he turned to the paralyzed man--"I say to you, stand up, take your bed, and go home" And he got up, and once took his stretcher and went out in the full view of them all, so that they were astounded and praised God. "Never before," they said, "have we seen the like."<sup>16</sup>

After the reading, time was given for reflection.

In about five minutes, I asked the group to come back to normal consciousness and begin to share any first impressions, or reactions there might be. There were few, most remarks seem to relate to how easy this passage is to visualize. Next I asked that, assuming this

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<sup>16</sup>Mark 2:1-12 (NEB)

was a dream they had just experienced, a list be made of all the symbols which might be found in it. They listed:

The room  
The hole in the roof  
The crowd at the door  
Jesus, the source of healing  
The paralytic  
The four men who brought him  
The scoffing lawyers.

Entering into the discussion with them, I asked each person to choose one of the listed symbols to which he felt the most attachment. Which seemed to be the most powerful image? Was there any trouble seeing oneself involved in the picture?

Their responses were rather interesting. One older woman could not answer right off, so we went on to the next. This person, a college student, said she related rather well with the lawyers. Another woman, a doctor's receptionist and a beautiful soul, saw herself as Jesus, the healer. The fourth person identified rather strongly with one of the four men bringing the paralytic on the stretcher.

Since that week I was feeling frustrated about my work, I gravitated toward the image of the paralytic. It was more than coincidence, really, that the person who felt like one of pallet-bearers was someone who had been helpful to me more than once this past year. Finally, we went back to the woman who was not ready at first to answer. She said after a pause that she just realized that she was one of the people in the crowd standing at the door. At once she began to describe to us in vivid detail the structure of the room, its furnishings, where Jesus was standing, and other details which were recalled with great certainty. I asked her why she thought she was someone in

the crowd, but she didn't know. A few moments later the woman was in tears and very embarrassed. She finally told us that she wanted to go into the room, but just couldn't. Talking to her later, she revealed to me the reason. In the guided meditation she discovered that she did not want to get involved with what was taking place, for fear that she too might become healed.<sup>17</sup>

Every insight that provides understanding kills some fantasy which has eluded us. A symbol, artistic or religious, facilitates such insight by bringing certain experiences into focus--experiences which are at the core of our humanity and which are inseparable from our reality. A symbol does this because it arouses what is close to the surface of our consciousness so that we must deal with the meaning of our individual condition at the moment. As we move toward more understanding and our experience deepens, we may need different images, different music, or different ritual to take us to the next step.

#### THEOPOETIC AND SOCIAL WITNESS

The impact of the first century church upon the pagan world was primarily an assault on the way people were thinking about God and man. As such, it resembled a war of myths. The kerygma was the central truth around which the followers of Jesus constructed a poetic story expressing what they believed God was doing in the Christ-Event.

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<sup>17</sup>For a full discussion on the use of this passage and others in a psychotheological application, see Walter Wink, The Bible in Human Transformation (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973). The book includes a valuable appendix by Dr. Elizabeth Boyden Howes of the Guild for Psychological Studies in California.

With it they confronted the official cultus of the Graeco-Roman world and stormed the ecclesiastical trenches of an overly confident Judaism.

The power of Jesus' ministry among the throngs was inseparable from the dramatizations he employed. His language drew on old archetypes and common symbols which seemed to call forth the faith of his followers and release the primordial desires within them to know God. It was a time, not dissimilar to ours, in which the "establishment" was a fading myth and the cultural crisis was such that the common folk were willing to listen to anyone who had a better idea. The church utilized the compelling imagery of Jewish apocalyptic literature to drive home the cosmic significance of the kingdom's coming. The readiness with which the Christian movement could find a hearing seems to indicate the church's success in relating itself to the unconscious dynamics of the time, the outcome of this creative tension being a re-symbolization of God language. The static images of the church and state no longer elicited the confidence of the people. Part of the proclamation was that God would no longer be worshipped in Jerusalem and temple, but in Spirit and in Truth.<sup>18</sup>

What Jesus did, his followers imitated. The rise in influence of first century Christianity is closely related to its mythmaking ability. Not that the church of this era is best noted for its metaphorical allusions or its unique folklore, but rather by its ingenious use of epiphanic imagery. The dynamic way in which the company of the redeemed increased its following was by celebrating and proclaiming

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<sup>18</sup>John 4:21-24.

the transforming vision of Christ as the hope of the world. God has been made known in their experience. They had touched and handled this revelation in the person of Jesus. Their literary compositions were not mere recitals of the wonderful things God had once done to a certain people at a certain time in history. They were primarily letters sent to one another and preserved to lead men and women into realizing the redemptive mystery present in all of life.

The new and compelling image of Christ made a difference. The church's entire social witness should grow out of this difference God-in-Christ makes in the way men and women structure their world-view. The ministry of the disciples was to increase people's awareness of the sacred tint the world was taking on. While before, some of the householders used and abused slaves, when they became Christian all previous myths of humanity were destroyed. It was their admission that they could no longer regard anyone from a merely human point of view, even as they once regarded Jesus.

So it must be for us in the twentieth century, that our social witness will begin with the task of consciousness-raising. In a poetic sense, the church must challenge the myths of the modern society, the pagan myths that kill and stifle and corrupt. In its sacramental life, the church lifts up a symbol of human experience or a ritual and mirrors to all nations the reality that this world is drenched with God-meaning, in fact, has no meaning apart from God. The sacramental life of the church is meant to be a kind of "guerilla theatre" in which she shows an intelligible event which makes all other events intelligible.

What the Christian community has to offer by way of distinctiveness is not salvation--that is already God's accomplishment in Jesus Christ--but a peculiar kind of consciousness wherein people will realize what must be known for healing and wholeness. Gregory Baum makes the point this way:

The church alone is conscious of the redemptive mystery that goes on everywhere. The Christian is aware of what goes on in him and others: he believes that in Christ the universal mystery of redemption has been made known to him. While the Word and the Spirit are present to people everywhere and, in fact, constitute their history, the Christian alone explicitly acknowledges this mystery which is omnipresent in the lives of men.<sup>19</sup>

Expanded consciousness is talked about much today. It is seen as the crucial factor in facilitating the ongoing process of humanization. Without it there is no sensitivity, no awareness of all that is eternal about existence. The church, as a people who have forsaken their own selfish myths in metanoia, can best speak to the possibilities that lie open for man. But also, it is the church who knows the demonic danger of unraised consciousness, of myths that go unexposed. The church must cry out and confront the exploitative victimization that is accomplished in the name of whatever pagan mythologies crush the eternal dream. Whether it be sexism, racism, psychological rationalizations, social and political totalitarianism, or ecological atrocities, such sinful human tendencies must be pointed out as the stifling nightmares they are. The church must be the visible sign among the nations of what is taking place in God's world.

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<sup>19</sup>Gregory Baum, Man Becoming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 64.



## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have attempted to describe, not so much how we communicate our knowledge to God, but how we experience God and how this experience shapes our descriptions of such Presence. I began by describing the need for a resymbolization process to the extent that we lift up fresh new images and parables that reflect our own contemporary experience of God. The struggle for cultural rebirth is also a struggle for religious rebirth, for unless our artistic modes of communication are viable carriers of meaning, the good news of faith-experience is lost.

I have argued that God is not explained but experienced and that we need only to get in touch with our experience to know the living God. It is the artist who must lead the way, for such a person lives in resonance to the ebb and flow of life and celebrates its wonder. Unbeknownst to most of us we are all mystics for each of us perceives more by intuitive modes of experience than is realized. The workings of the mind and the mysteries of divine reality are integrated, for out of such an integration comes each inspiration. Theopoetic expression can awaken our imagination and so inspire us to experience the living presence of God.

In this paper I have discussed the multi-dimensional nature of a Christian theopoetic in an attempt to show not only the close relationship between how God is perceived and the process of symbolization itself, but also that Jesus and the early church used parable,

metaphor and symbol in sharing the message. The plea has been made for a renewed look at the importance of myth on human consciousness and to once again take seriously the mystic's quest to move beyond descriptive analysis to a more personal religious experience. Whether or not the church keeps alive the burning coals of mystical experience may determine the future style of religion.

Since this is a foundational work, and certainly not the final word on the subject, I have only made preliminary suggestions as to possibilities for a theopoetic style of Christian ministry. In a time when the clergyman is duplicating much of the work of secular professionals, I have called for the reemergence of the minister as a specialist of the soul, not a pious spiritualist, but someone who understands and ministers to the psychotheological aspect of human existence.

Much more work needs to be done in extending the applicability of a theopoetic approach to the church's discipline and witness, but hopefully certain directions have been charted here.

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